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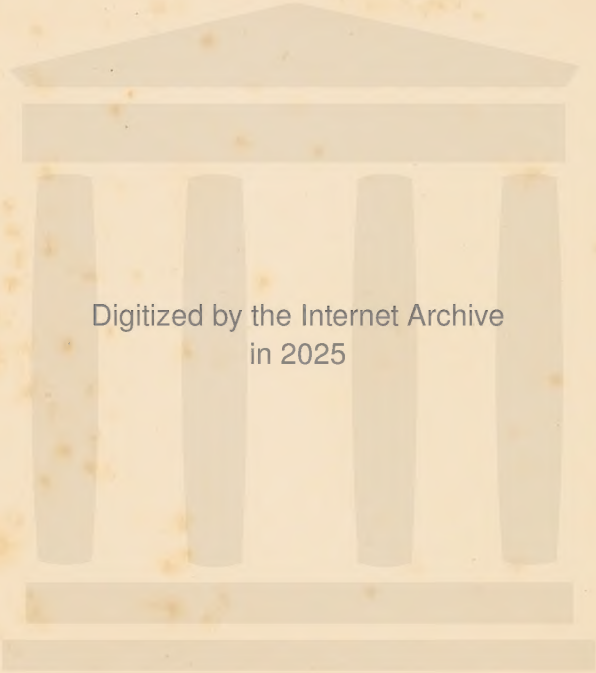

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SO NEAR AKIN.

A Novel.

BY

M. A. BENGOUGH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1891.

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SO NEAR AKIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH.

"My dear Nephew,

"The delay in answering your communication—a delay which you may perhaps have thought strange—arose not from indifference, but from a hope, happily fulfilled, of being able to write you something definite.

"It seems a providential coincidence that, on the very afternoon on which I received your letter, I was called upon by

a worthy and valued old friend, one whose name is as highly respected, as it is widely known, in commercial circles. In the course of conversation, Mr. Higginbotham chanced to mention that his nephew, a young man of excellent principles, but, unfortunately, delicate health, had been unexpectedly ordered abroad for the winter by his medical adviser. The young man in question has been for some years junior partner in the firm, and very active in that capacity. His temporary absence, by throwing more work on my friend, necessitates a readjustment of business, and the engagement of extra assistance. I mentioned your case, of which the details interested him as a Christian, and your qualifications, which seemed to please him as a man of business. Your acquaintance with foreign languages he seemed to consider a great point in your favour ; on

the other hand, your almost total *practical* ignorance of business is of course against you. The upshot of the matter was that, if I did not hear to the contrary by a certain date, you might call at the offices of the firm in Leadenhall Street, on Thursday morning next, at ten punctually. I cannot, of course, promise you success, but you have my best wishes, as also those of your aunt and cousins. In any case, we shall look for your company on Christmas Day; we shall be quite a family party, but, I trust, a temperately joyous one.

"I need only add that your resolution has been a great source of refreshment to all of us. You do not mention it, but you can scarcely fail to be meeting with discouragement, if not with persecution, in the pursuance of your resolution. Persevere, however, my young friend; it is

only what must be expected—a consolatory proof of the true nature of your action.

"Remember me to your parents. The best wishes I can frame for them are not, I fear, of a nature that they can appreciate. That some day they may come to do so must be your earnest hope, as it is that of your affectionate uncle,

"THOMAS PATON."

George folded the letter methodically, and stood for a while to think. There were things in it that did not please him; other things which afforded him a grim amusement. He did not like the idea of being an interesting case; liked it so little that, for a moment, he thought of throwing up the whole business. But this was a mere transient, unregenerate impulse. It could not weigh for an instant either

against his hatred of his profession, or his love for Hester.

His love for Hester, for of that he was now aware. It had been no sudden seizure; he could not have told the moment of its birth. But during the few remaining weeks of her stay in London, slowly, but surely, more and more after every interview, she had been gaining possession of his heart for her throne and for her shrine. She was its queen; yet, more, she was its saint. He venerated even more than he loved her, though, indeed, he came to love her by-and-bye with all the force of his nature—a nature not fundamentally passionate, though liable to blasts of passion, shaking, devastating, but transient, and, as it were, external to himself. She fulfilled his ideal of womanhood. It was an ideal, like most of his, formed negatively, and hence somewhat

wanting in colour and vitality. Hester gave it both, bringing it into the region of the positive. The woman of his dreams was not flippant; Hester was expressly reverent, in every relation of life. Again, his "not impossible she," was not loud nor flighty, neither emancipated nor advanced, patient of restraint, guarded even in opinion. Hester was gentle in every fibre of her being, sober with a cheerful, unvarying sobriety, never unduly excited nor unreasonably depressed; she was also infinitely dutiful, dependent without weakness, deferential without servility. This, of course, is George's analysis of her character, but many lovers are much further from the truth; it may be said that his estimate was substantially correct. It was a recommendation to him that even her beauty did not dazzle, though the gaze, once attracted, seldom failed to linger.

He set her image now as his shield against the darts which Captain Paton had managed to insert amid the cloud of his anything but winged words. Then he prepared to inform his parents of his change of plans. The first person whom he met was his father.

William Paton heard him out without remark. Then he said:

"All right, my boy; good luck go with you! After all, you know—I don't want to say anything unpleasant—but you won't be much loss to the profession. You did your best, I'm sure, but one can't make a silk purse—you understand? No offence, I hope?"

"Not the least," said George; but he was offended.

He had never supposed himself to be a genius; but, just because of his intense dislike to the business, he had taken extra

pains to do it conscientiously. And when you have almost made a religious duty of an action, it is unpleasant to be told that you have been a total failure.

In point of fact, he had neither been so good an actor as he himself believed, nor so bad as his father made out. The truth was that William Paton had certain very practical reasons of his own for objecting to his son's resolution. It never occurred to him to try and hinder it; indeed, the reasons he had against it were scarcely such as he could adduce openly, and he was no diplomat. But he did dislike it, and this bit of criticism was his revenge.

"Take it rather as a compliment? Well, I wish you success! So Thomas wrote to you?" he continued, after a pause. Something of the old twinkle rose to his eye—a bleared sort of reminiscence of it—for there were fully ten

years deterioration of body and soul marked on his face, when not made up for the stage. "You don't happen to have his letter anywhere about you, that I might have a look at it?"

"I left it in my room," said George, frigidly.

"Ah, well, no matter. I suppose you are going to tell your mother now. Ta! ta!" And he hobbled off—he suffered a good deal from gout in these days.

So much for the tyrant father. His interview with his mother was less irritating, but it fell far short of the pathetic. She cried a good deal, it is true, when she came to understand that he was going away, but she made no attempt to dissuade him. He knew, of course, that she was a woman who never could grasp the meaning of any proposal till it was an accomplished fact; still he thought she

might have shown more reluctance. In his own room he took out the letter again, and laughed bitterly enough. Discouragement and persecution indeed! He did not admit to himself that he would have found them flattering; yet such was really the case. He was wounded, dissatisfied, angry with himself and sore with all the world. His ideas of the family were somewhat inverted. All his life he had lived in dangerous contradiction to the wholesome, if homely, proverb concerning the instruction of grandmothers; circumstances had almost forced it on him. His mother he truly loved, indeed, if he did not greatly respect her. His father he could not be said either to love or respect; still, he had always tried to do his duty by both parents; at the cost of considerable personal inconvenience, he had done it. And now he was going, and nobody cared.

It was not, certainly, a sense of the gratitude of men that left *him* mourning.

The next day he presented himself at the office, with very favourable results. He spent some time in finding a lodging in a more decorous locality, came back in the afternoon to pack up his simple belongings, and that evening made his farewells to his parents, as he wished to be settled in his new lodgings that night.

At the last his mother's tears, like her kisses, gushed out with true Irish vehemence; but she was acting that night, and he left her with the conviction that her emotion would not interfere either with her interpretation, or with her enjoyment, of her part. His father, standing in the passage, gave him his paternal blessing out of one of his best rôles, for the benefit of the landlady, the maid-of-all-work, and the driver, who were much impressed.

George was less so. He got quickly into the coach, flinging himself fiercely back into the corner to avoid seeing the admirable attitude his father was striking on the doorstep. The driver slammed the door, and they drove off through the twilight, just as the lamp-lighter was beginning his rounds. So simply and uneffectively George Paton broke with his past.

In accordance with Captain Paton's invitation, he did make one of the family party on Christmas-day. This year, in honour of the projected alliance between the families, the Stephenses were to remain in Clapham, instead of going to the Barlings. So, on the very threshold of his experiment, George found himself admitted to one of those family Christmases which had been his dream for years. In shady lodgings, and second-rate inns; in mornings spent in dutiful

attendance at church, which, somehow, only brought him a moderate degree of consolation; amid afternoons of purposeless wanderings through empty streets; amid evenings of rollicking festivity when times were good—evenings which had nothing festive about them for him; in prolonged vigils by the side of his drowsy but unagitated mother, waiting for a stumbling footstep, when times were too bad for anything but a treat to some equally impecunious friend at the nearest public-house: always he had had some such dream as this. Now, was he satisfied? Did he leave any successor, that one perfectly happy, shirtless man?

It must be owned that there was something to put up with; it was not pleasant to be watched and guided as though he were now entering civilized society for the first time. But because he could therefore

put himself, as it were, under Hester's wing, he contrived to find consolation under even this trial. And Hester was in her modest glory; she evidently thought she had discovered if she had not actually created him.

Perhaps he found the Christmas games, with which the day's festivities ended, the least sympathetic part of the proceedings. The free use made of the traditions of the mistletoe, and of the opportunities afforded by the games of forfeits, clashed somehow with his expectations. Of course he knew such things were done; in the days when he went a gipsying he had tested their attractions for himself, that is till he got tired of them. It had not taken long to make him that, for his want of success among the very outspoken ladies of his acquaintance had been marked. He did not understand the first elements of flirta-

tion, and after a very short campaign, in the first effervescence of his precocious manhood, during which he had frequent occasion to recall the fable of the lap-dog and the donkey, he retired from the field, with little desire ever to return to it. He had not expected to find such things tolerated in a serious family. Yet there was actually Hester, submitting, with the prettiest blush, but quite unresentfully, to the embrace of Frank Woods, Mary Stephens' *fiancée*, who could not in any sense be considered a member of the family. No doubt, if George had claimed the privilege, she would have granted it with as little reluctance or emotion as in the other case. But he was not going to profane his romance that way. No indeed! the time when his lips should first press hers it should be with some significance, not in the carnival follies of

an idiotic game. He was fast losing his serenity; still, not to make himself ridiculous by keeping conspicuously aloof, he bestowed a salute on Susan Stephens, who was evidently considered socially a minor, and a more effusive one on Anne, who seemed to him a dazzling but recognizable importation from his own old world. She had more education, more social polish, more genius perhaps, certainly far greater beauty and grace. But fundamentally he knew her for one of the brotherhood; he had lived too long in Bohemia not to have an instinct for a native, and here undoubtedly was one who had somehow got astray. He did not like her the better for it, but the knowledge put him very much at his ease in his intercourse with her—an intercourse in which he only condescended to be serious when he wished to be repressive.

He had, after all, one moment of ideal satisfaction that evening. It was when he was sent out, with Hester as a partner, while the rest of the party settled on a subject for 'How? When? and Where?' Greatly conscientious, Hester was not content to remain outside the door; she took him across the landing into the old school-room, and there they sat down in the darkness just informed with a hint of light from the last red embers of the dying fire. She spoke very little, and what she said was very commonplace, but it was the silence of the situation that pleased him best. The party in the drawing-room took some time over their decision; now and then a burst of laughter reached them, when this was so Hester would echo it softly, and say they seemed very merry. To George the laughter, like the narrow shaft of light that streamed

from the landing through the school-room door left ajar, seemed to belong to another world. The good, the only true world was here, in the darkness, musical with silence, fragrant with an ethereal suggestion of perfume from her very presence. He was angry when the drawing-room door was burst open, and Jim Stephens yelled to them that the word was settled; but Hester gently rallied them on the time they had taken to decide.

With that evening began the happiest time of George Paton's life. He soon ceased to be a natural curiosity; before long his antecedents even seemed to have been practically forgotten, there were times when he almost forgot them himself. When he was leaving the house, the day after Christmas, Captain Paton had invited him to make a rule of coming out to them for his Saturdays and Sundays. He put

it rather infelicitously, basing the invitation more on his nephew's temptations than on his loneliness; but George did not refuse, and there were few fine Saturdays on which he failed to appear in the afternoon, bag in hand, having walked over from his lodgings. So that by the time spring came round he had become practically one of the family, entering unannounced and making himself at home like a son of the house.

He was still with Mr. Higginbotham; there he had gone on and prospered beyond all expectation. His principal pompously thanked Captain Paton for having recommended a treasure. His want of practical acquaintance with business had soon been remedied, partly by unwearied application and observation, partly, as it seemed, by instinct. If, outside the ranks of Israel, such beings exist, George Paton would

appear to have been a heaven-born merchant. He loved his work. Even the comparatively mechanical work of the lower grades of clerkship was not actual drudgery to him; it is true he was not kept long at that. His old life, to which perhaps he never gave a willing thought, had chanced to furnish him with the very equipment which was to conquer success.

In the queer shifting train of companions who had drifted into his life, and drifted out again, had been representatives of almost every nation under heaven, and George had put them all under requisition. With a natural genius, almost a passion, for languages, with the vague intention which he had always cherished of a change in his career, he had set to work to find a professor in each one of them. From sprightly French fiddlers of sanguinary political principles; from third-rate Italian

tenors, fallen local stars, shot down at last upon our not urgently artistic shores; from German professors of occult sciences; from Poles, Greeks, Hungarians, of no recognized vocation or discoverable antecedents; from all these and more he had made his profit. It had been a queer way of acquiring knowledge, but it had been an effective one. And though he had come to look back on those days almost with a shudder, it is to be hoped that he was not all ungrateful, not quite forgetful of those long-haired, shabby, oily, smoke-saturated, mysterious, but always disreputable professors.

He should not have been, for it was indirectly to what they had done for him that he owed the hour in which the bud of his happiness burst into fragrant bloom. It was an afternoon in spring, a day or two before Easter. Far down the sunny path

in the back garden, Hester was waiting for him.

In the family it had come to be considered that George was naturally Hester's property, by right of spiritual motherhood. It was to her share that he fell as partner in their walks, she sat by him at table, she was the first to know of his welfare or his troubles. She was sympathizer, confidante, counsellor, and, when she thought need was, reprover. And in all this she saw no more strangeness than did the others; time had merely accentuated her feelings towards her kinsman, it had not changed them.

She had gone out this afternoon to gather violets for his room; hearing his footsteps, she rose from stooping over the bed, and stood a moment, shielding her eyes from the sun, to see who was there. She had come out without her hat, and finding the sun stronger than she had

expected, she had tied her handkerchief over her head, knotting it under her chin. She was dressed in some soft brown woollen material, which fell in simple folds to her feet, and she had stuck a few primroses into the bosom of her gown.

Sober, without austerity, a charming little Puritan figure, she stood there in the sunshine, which drew out a hint of gold in the smooth band of brown hair visible beneath the white coif. Then she came forward with a smile.

"Three whole weeks since you have been near us," she said; "but I felt sure you would come to-day. You ought to have plenty of news for us, after such a long time; I hope you have, and that it is all good."

"I have a great deal to tell you," he said, with a restrained triumph in his voice. "Shall I begin now."

"Do!" she said delightedly. "Sit down here and make it into a nice long story, fit for Saturday afternoon."

They sat down together.

"Am I really to make a story of it? Well, then, listen, and don't interrupt."

There was something in his tone which was new to her, a kind of playfulness carrying off subdued excitement. She folded her hands on her lap and looked up, pleasantly expectant. The warmth of the spring sunshine radiated from the sun-saturated bricks, and made a glow about them as they sat; an early bee hummed faintly in and out of the pear-tree blooms upon the wall; a tiny breeze, with a touch of sharpness in it still, stirred Hester's gown about her feet; the violets in her hand gave forth occasional whiffs of sweetness. And George began his tale.

It was really as a story that he told it.

He told of a changeling. How once, in a land she had never heard of, there lived a man and wife, great folks in that country, people who could trace back their ancestry there for generations, and how, sadly and strangely for the boy, their only child was a changeling. He told of the boy's loneliness, a stranger in a strange land, a land in which every man did that which was right in the sight of his eyes—and in his own eyes, as he paused a moment, there was a gleam of angry reminiscence. Then he told how the rest of the folk mocked him; how they flaunted their lawlessness before his face, and tried to make him join in it. And he joined. But he was only the more miserable, for he had to learn now to despise himself for the same things for which he had hitherto despised them.

"Oh!" said Hester, uncertainly, beginning at last to suspect an allegory, of whose

meaning she was not sure; "but it would have been better to try and improve them."

"Perhaps; but he was no saint, and, so far, the saints had had little to say to him. He was very much alone; if I could only make you understand how terribly alone he was!"

There was a rising excitement in his voice; when he saw a trouble from it reflected in her eyes, he checked it.

"Don't distress yourself; the saddest part is over. For one day a dear saint did come to him. No statue stepped down from its niche, no picture smiled at him from the frescoed wall; in the common thoroughfare, in the guise of a maiden of his own land, she came and called him. And he followed her. He left it all behind him, the noisy revelry, the glittering emptiness, and the ache at the bottom of it all,

and went after her to his fatherland. a new man — or shall I say himself again?"

"That was good," said Hester, gently, a little tremulously too; his growing agitation affected her.

"Was it not? Oh! my sweet saint! When you spoke, your voice had power to hush all the horrible haunting echoes from the old days, your touch purified, your glance uplifted. Hester! do you not understand? You who saved me, don't let me go. Be more near, and mine for ever—saint and wife!"

"Oh! George; you—you ought to have said all this to papa!"

But she made only a very faint and perfunctory attempt at releasing the hands which he had seized as he knelt at her feet. Fortunately George was far too much exalted to be sensible of anything

ludicrous in the words, indeed he scarcely heard them.

"Give me an answer, Hester. I don't deserve that you should love me; but you, who have a heart for all creatures, surely you have one little special corner for me—your own creature. Can't you love me, Hester?"

She turned her half-averted head and the soft sweetness of her eyes upon him.

"Oh! George—but—I do!"

And then, for a few moments, she was only conscious of being very frightened; of being caught up in some moral whirlwind, overpowered, carried away by a force which she could not resist, not unpleasing, but altogether bewildering. Afterwards she was almost surprised to find how nearly abstract this sudden rapture had been; afterwards she remembered that though, when she came to herself, her hands were

glowing with his kisses, yet he was still at her feet; his lips had never once tried to touch hers, nor had she had to defend herself from his embrace.

"But you understand, dear," she said, when he seemed able to listen to reason; "I cannot really promise anything without my father's and mother's consent. Everything must depend upon that."

"Yes, yes," said George, with a certain impatience. "But if I could assure you that I had it, before I ventured to approach you?"

"Oh! in that case——"

"It is the case; what then?"

"How good you are, George!" she said admiringly. In fact no proof of personal devotion he could have given her would have pleased her so much.

"Of course I am; don't you know who was my teacher?"

"Oh! no. But let me go now. I—I am frightened! No, dear, I don't mean that, but you took me so by surprise, and it is all so strange and new. Oh! George, dear, let me go to mamma!"

She was longing to be off with her strange experience, and after humbly exacting his first kiss, he let her go, and she was soon laughing and crying in her mother's arms.

Meanwhile, with George, prose was fast following on the heels of poetry. He had sat down again upon the old plank; the violets Hester had dropped in her agitation lay scattered about the gravel, and he stooped to gather them up. Just as he had collected them he saw Captain Paton advancing towards him.

"So!" he exclaimed, as he bore down upon the lover still dazed with his dream. "So! I see Queen Mab has been with

you! Oh, young men, young men!" And shaking his head, with ponderous jocularity, he sat down on the bench from which George had risen. "But this," he suddenly added, "is not an occasion for jesting. Young man, it is a very serious responsibility you are taking upon yourself. Do you feel equal to it?"

"Equal to it, yes; worthy of it, no. But I hope more and more to become so."

"A very proper wish; I hope so too. Because," after a silence following this encouraging remark, "painful though the allusion is, you see you were not always what you are now. You have a past."

He said it as if the tense were only predicable of the non-respectable classes.

"A past with which I have for ever broken," said George, with more self-control than could have been expected—but it was for Hester's sake. "I think

you know that, even while I had anything to do with it, I hated it. I had hoped that the whole tenor of my conduct, since you have known me, would have been proof sufficient of that. If not, I scarcely know what to say that could be convincing. I can only assure you that there is nothing on earth that could induce me even to wish to go back to my old life."

"Well, no one can say fairer than that. Of course the heart is deceitful; but I may say there are not many young men whose statement, under the circumstances, I would sooner accept than yours." George acknowledged the compliment with a bow, and some indistinct words. "And now we come to consider your present financial situation. You have still reason to consider it satisfactory?"

"The same reason I had when I wrote," said George, with a passionate

aspiration for patience. "It seems certain that young Mr. Higginbotham's health will never allow him to apply himself to business again. It was settled that I should take all the overlooking and correspondence of the foreign connection of the firm, which is important and extensive. I told you it will probably involve a certain amount of travelling, but I thought you were satisfied with the promise that I would make England my permanent head-quarters. And I thought you were satisfied with the promised salary."

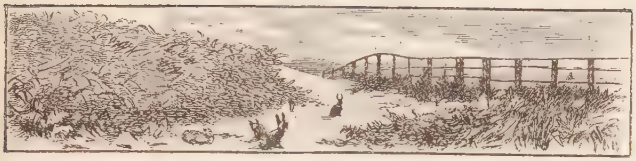
"Well," said the Captain, "yes. Then under all the circumstances, I don't see what is to prevent me from giving you both my blessing. You have it, my son. And now, where is Hester?"

"She went indoors, sir."

"Doubtless to her mother; she must have been agitated. I will rejoin her.

Don't let me disturb you," as George was preparing to accompany him.

Not disturb him, indeed! George sat down again, trying to gather round him the scattered fragments of his dream, but it was of no avail. The spell had been too rudely broken. The magic was gone from sunshine, scent and flower. The very violets she had gathered for him, which he had meant to treasure for ever, were drooping between his fingers, crushed in the fierce effort at self-restraint; two or three purple heads, nipped thus from the stalk, lay breathing out their last sweetness on the ground.



CHAPTER II.

AT LAST.

HESTER'S engagement was officially announced, as soon as George had returned to town on Tuesday. She had entreated to be spared the ordeal of an earlier announcement, declaring that it would quite spoil the visit. As it was, those few days left, for ever, a memory of ideal happiness. For George there was no more putting to the torture; he took care never to be left again without Hester's protection, and she was a wonderful peace-keeper. And the hours they spent together, apart from the world, were idyllic.

But those few days were too soon over, and then their Eden had to be thrown open to the public. Mrs. Stephens called the same afternoon, to congratulate and to hear all about it. Hester, unembarrassed by the bodily presence of her conquest, was very sweet and happy; there was plenty of kissing and smiling and fondling, of all that emotional display of which, in the depths of their hearts, even her own family felt that Anne had rather defrauded them, in her time. Of course she had long passed beyond that stage; but from the first, it was secretly admitted, she had never been such a satisfactory *fiancée* as Hester.

She sat and listened to George's praises with blushing smiles, and sang his perfections and her own happiness in a low murmurous undersong, breaking out now responsive, now original, like the bubbling

of a spring brimming over with content. So she smiled and prattled on, till she started, with a look at the clock.

"Yes, it wants only three-quarters of an hour to post-time," said Mrs. Stephens, archly. "Run away, my dear; leave us to pull dear George to pieces."

"You wouldn't," said Hester, pausing on the threshold. "But if you did, it wouldn't matter; you could only find more things to admire. I have found that even in these few days," with which unwonted defiance she turned and fled.

"Darling Hester! Isn't it sweet to see her so happy?" exclaimed Mrs. Paton, applying the ever ready cambric to her eyes.

"Delightful! And the match is quite satisfactory from *every* point of view?"

"Quite. Oh! Maria, we have indeed been fortunate in our children. Dear

Anne united to the companion of her childhood," (Mrs. Stephens winced slightly) "and now dear Hester, first winning her lover's soul, and then his heart. There is something romantic about it, don't you think so? About both matches, indeed. I really don't know which is the prettier idea; in the days when I wrote poetry—(ah! those dear old days, Maria), I could have made something of both. In one case, the dawn of love in infancy growing insensibly into the glorious day; in the other, the torch of love kindled on the altar of conscience. Don't you think it would have made a pretty stanza?"

"I daresay; I never had either your time or your turn for verses, my dear. Then you really haven't any anxiety about his moral character? Of course, my dear Jane, I don't accuse you of thinking too little of such things, and the sun and the

torch, and all that, are very pretty in poetry. But in plain English, my dear, it is rather too funny even to talk of a young man like Henry, who has been everything a mother could wish from his babyhood, in the same breath with one that everybody knows has led a queer life in his time."

"Oh, Maria!"

"There, for goodness' sake, don't cry! What is there to cry about? I'm sure I've nothing to say against his character. Only it seems odd how he should have come by his ways of thinking; and to say he always had them—my dear, I don't believe it. It's against nature; 'what's bred in the bone comes out in the flesh.'"

"That's not what Solomon says," said Mrs. Paton, more in sorrow than in anger. "I'm sure, Maria, if anybody believed that verse you ought to. With such a family as yours, you have no excuse."

"Did I say I did not believe it? But if Solomon ever said, 'Train up a child in the way he should *not* go, and when he is old he will jump at any chance of departing from it,' *I* never heard it, that's all. And I never saw an instance of it before, that's more."

"But it always seems to me that George is such a striking example of that so encouraging saying, just as it stands. I mean Solomon's."

"Oh! if you are satisfied with the training of a strolling actor!—no offence, my dear. Only don't compare it to Henry's."

"Did I? I never meant to. But, indeed, you are mistaken about George; he didn't begin to live with his parents till he was about twelve years old. Up till then he was very strictly brought up; she kept a little fancy shop and let lodgings, but she was a most respectable

person, and George always speaks most highly of her."

"Indeed! Who was she, and how was it?"

"They were lodging there when he was a baby, and he was very ill—it must have been croup, I think, from what he says, but of course he can't remember the symptoms very clearly—and his mother had to start next day for some of this dreadful acting, and the baby was dying, and she was breaking her heart, so then this good woman offered to keep him till they could come and fetch him."

"And she ended by adopting him?"

"Till she died, and then she had no belongings, and she left him all her savings and the house. But of course he couldn't live there, because, as I said, he was only twelve years old. I believe they wanted to send him to school with the money, but

his mother said he must come back. I must say she seems to have been very fond of him."

"She seems to have let him go pretty easily."

"Well, you see, when she came to fetch him first, she had just buried her seventh baby, and I suppose she was out of heart about the bringing up of children; George is the only one that has lived to grow up. She seems to have been a wretched manager, in every way; but what could you expect?"

"So he went back?"

"Yes; and they sold the house very well indeed, because some factory company or other wanted the ground. They invested the money carefully, too, and by the time he might get it, it was quite a nice little fixed income. Very small, of course; but anything must be better than living from hand to mouth."

"Oh, of course! if that is the case there is nothing wonderful about it any more. But you must remember you never told me that story before."

"You never gave me any reason for telling it," said Mrs. Paton, plaintively. "When you talk as if you thought I should give my sweet girl to a young man who had never begun to see the error of his ways till six months ago, I was bound to speak."

"I only spoke because I felt surprised at the way he feels about things; that's natural enough, anybody would. And I'm sure I congratulated Hester; didn't I come on purpose to do it? When is the wedding to be?"

"We haven't begun to think about that yet. But it would be very sweet if the two dear girls could be married at the same time; don't you think so? And I suppose——"

"I've given up supposing!" said Mrs. Stephens, with a sort of snappish resignation. "I thought, at Christmas, it was all but over, and a blessing it would have been; I said so then and I say so still. I don't mind telling *you* that I had counted on it, in my mind, to be over before Mary's wedding. It would have been easy to put that off a month or so, on that account; and what the expenses have been, nobody knows. There will be no summer frocks for the twins this year, and so I tell them, poor things!"

"I suppose you would have had to go into some sort of complimentary mourning?"

"Mourning, yes; but that wouldn't have mattered then. I hope Henry won't grudge his mother and sisters the price of a black gown or two! Still, one has a feeling; one doesn't like to think of

waiting for dead men's shoes to dance at a wedding in; so there was no help for it."

"Well," sighed Mrs. Paton, "paralysis is a mysterious dispensation."

"It *is!*" said Mrs. Stephens, with emphasis.

The ladies were sitting side by side on the sofa, opposite a window which looked out to the front of the house. Through the window they were absently gazing, meditating in silence on the government of the universe, not without secret doubts of its morality, when, between the one or two limp green fans of the opening chestnut trees, they discerned a hackney-coach stopping before the gate, from which in another moment, with sedate haste, stepped Henry Stephens; and as he drew near, it could be seen that Henry had on a new hat, and that round the hat was a band of crape.

When they saw this, the two turned and looked on one another. Then Mrs. Stephens exclaimed, "At last!" threw her arms round her friend's neck, and fairly burst out crying.

It was thus that Henry discovered them, when he entered the room. Henry's manner was a study, only there was no one to study it; even his mother was thinking, for once, more of his news than of him. But Henry's manners were not assumed for show; they were an organic necessity. If he had been cast on Robinson Crusoe's island, he would have managed somehow to dress for dinner every day; man Friday would have found him doing it as a regular thing. On this occasion, he exactly hit the happy medium between solemnity and satisfaction.

"Dear mother, you have, I perceive, guessed my news. My mother is a little

agitated," he explained, apologetically, Mrs. Stephens having thrown herself into his arms on his first entrance. "You will excuse her, I am sure."

"Oh, my dear Henry, we are all so—happy!" ejaculated Mrs. Paton, and melted in her turn.

"Thank you, my kind friend. I have tried not to be too much so." And he spoke the perfect truth; he had tried. "It seems scarcely fitting to be—what shall I say?—over elated at such an event. It has involved a death. But I must own I am pleased too."

"Of course you're pleased, my blessed boy," cried Mrs. Stephens, with a fresh hug; she had dried her tears by this time. "It is like you to be troubling about poor Sir Robert now, but haven't I shown you the rights of it, scores of times?"

"Poor Sir Robert!" exclaimed Mrs. Paton, a little hysterically; "who will never want his title any more."

Mrs. Stephens started.

"Why, my dear Jane! no more—he—will. And to think you should be the first to think of it! Come, Sir Henry; oh, Sir Henry! stand back, sir, and let us look at you." She pushed him from her and had a good look at him, who bore the ordeal with irreproachable grace. Then she sank down on a chair and held out her arms. "Ah, no! never to me; my own Henry, my dear boy, my first baby! Oh, if your poor papa could have lived to see this day!"

Henry was a good deal touched, but even then it could not fail to strike his clear and logical mind that, if his father had survived, this day, so far as he himself was concerned, could never have been.

It may really have cost him an effort to refrain from clearing up the genealogical muddle; Henry did so hate a mistake. If so, he made the effort with success; he came and bent over her, uttering none but the most soothing, flattering, and dutiful words from time to time, as she would let him; while, perhaps fortunately unnoticed and unheard, Mrs. Paton sat softly swaying reed-like on the sofa, murmuring ever into her pocket-handkerchief, "Sir Henry and Lady Stephens! Sir Henry and Lady Stephens!"

"And when did you hear?" asked Mrs. Stephens, when they had all begun to recover their senses a little.

"This morning," said Henry, a little reproachfully. "Do you think I should have failed to come at once? It appears that poor Sir Robert had a third seizure on Thursday last, from which he never

rallied, expiring within some few hours of the attack."

"You are going to the funeral?"

"Of course. It will be rather hard work to get there in time; but I am told money can do wonders with post-boys, and of course, on such a mission, I shall shrink neither from expense nor from fatigue. I shall not need to go so far as to the house. That, I regret to learn, is two or three miles from the church."

"That won't signify when you keep your carriage," exulted Mrs. Stephens. "But of course you will go to the house afterwards, to hear the will read, and all that? Dear me, how tiresome that I can't come with you! You are the dearest, cleverest son—but you are only a man, after all, and I'm so afraid you may forget to notice just the most important things. I think I'll make out a

list for you to take with you. The place is sure to want any amount of repairing; with a childless old widower living so long in two rooms, as you might say, I shouldn't wonder if a good part wasn't actually going to wrack and ruin. But we'll soon alter all that."

"Yes, we must all work our best at that. I mustn't bring my bride home to a ruin, must I—Lady Stephens?"

It was like pulling the string of a shower-bath on an unprepared and unsuspecting head. Mrs. Stephens turned slowly round towards the door, whose opening she had been too much absorbed to notice, and on her face many conflicting, but all unpleasant, emotions gathered themselves. For a time she had forgotten, but she felt that henceforth she should never be able to forget again. Lady Stephens! But Anne was too

much taken by surprise to notice her mother-in-law at that moment.

"What do you mean?" she said, clear but puzzled. "Have you heard—— Oh, Sir Henry!"

A pause on the threshold for a sweeping curtsey, then she came dancing up the room and seized his hands.

"What fun!" she cried; "oh, what fun!"

"My dear Anne!" said Henry, suggestively.

"Oh, my precious daughter!" exclaimed Mrs. Paton, emotionally rapturous.

"Rather a curious expression, my love," said Mrs. Stephens.

Words cannot describe this tone; but Anne understood it.

"I know what you mean," she said. "You are thinking about 'what's fun to the boys is death to the frogs.' And, of

course, I'm very sorry for poor Sir Robert, and all that, only; after all, we *are* the boys, you see."

She really did not mean this as an aggravation of the offence, but of course it was one, and taken as intentional.

"Comparing Sir Robert to a frog!" as Mrs. Stephens wrote indignantly to Mary, describing this scene.

"I think, Anne, you are a little unstrung," said Henry, in a low voice, coming up to her. "There is a levity about your remarks which I am sure you will check when I tell you it is as distressing to me as it is to my mother."

"Are you going to tell me you aren't glad?"

Her half incredulous, half scornful, gaze seemed trying to search the depths of his heart. But his handsome grey eyes never flinched, and she would have found nothing

in all his well-balanced being to contradict his next words.

"No, dear Anne; I never thought of making such an assertion. How can I but rejoice at finding myself in a position to repay, in some measure, the self-sacrificing devotion which my mother has lavished on me all my life? To help my brothers and sisters on in the world? And how can you, of all persons, suppose I am not glad with all my heart at this removal of the only obstacle to our union? All I wished to suggest was the propriety, under all the circumstances, of a little moderation. And I think I know my dear girl too well to doubt her agreeing with me."

His dear girl looked at him considerингly.

"You'll make a very nice speech at the tenants' dinner, Henry," she said, disdaining to lower her voice. "I hope you will

give a copy to the reporters yourself. I have always heard they are so stupid, and it would be such a pity if it should come out as if you had been talking absolute nonsense, you know."

"That is a thing my son never does," interposed Mrs. Stephens with dignity.

"I know. Isn't it a blessing nonsense isn't catching?"

"Dear Anne, what makes you so perverse?" said her mother plaintively. "You are hurting Henry's feelings."

"Pray don't say such a thing, Jane! You will make Anne think him so absurdly sensitive. See how little he can affect hers."

"Unkind Maria!"

"Mother, I beg of you! Dearest Mrs. Paton, indeed we must all make excuses for each other to-day. The conditions are slightly abnormal, and I fear we have

all been more or less upset. Come, Anne, let us kiss our dear mothers—both our mothers. That is right; I knew you would! And now, I think, we ought to have a little time to plan out things for our two selves. I will just run over to give my good news to the twins, and then may I join you in the garden? Thank you, dear Mrs. Paton, not to-day. To-day I must have tea in the old home, once more."

He certainly covered a timely retreat with great skill, and Anne gave him due credit for it. She did not linger after his departure, but, as soon as she had heard the hall door shut safely behind him, went to put on her hat. But the step with which she left the room was not the dancing movement with which she had come in. Once outside the door, she went laggingly, conscious of a general

dislike to doing anything she was asked to do, and with a sub-consciousness of some reason for the feeling, which she did not care to examine just then.

On the landing, she lingered by the open window, and took a scientific aim with a bit of mortar at a self-satisfied cat dozing on the leads; she felt a little soothed when it got up and shook itself with a snarl of reproach. As she passed the schoolroom she loitered there too. Hester sat writing at a table in the window; the door had sprung open, but she had not observed it. Just as Anne looked in she paused in her letter, the pen still in her hand, and, lifting her head, looked outwards with a smile. She was not thinking what to say; that was all ready in her heart. It was clear she neither saw nor heard; but she sat there for that moment, drinking in the realiza-

tion of a happiness which overflowed from her soul to her happy face, dreamily bright with a "deep dream of peace."

Anne did not disturb her, but, as she leisurely mounted the stairs, the shade of vague discontent had come into her face again.

"I suppose if I were good I should be as happy as Hester," she said to herself as she knelt down by the window, folding her arms on the sill. "She is really in love with George, I suppose; it must be very funny to be in love—I wonder what it feels like? I don't believe I could be, so I'm never likely to know."

She began a little sigh, but it turned without effort or affectation into an honest yawn.

"I wish," she said—"I wish I knew what I wished. These days always make me want something, and I don't know

what it is. I wish I was out of all this. I wish that the wind would take me up and carry me off, and put me down somewhere where there is room; by the sea, perhaps. And then, by the sea, there should be a boat, and when the sun was going down I should get into it, and it would go off of itself. And then it would be night, and I should lie down, and the boat would go on and on, and the little waves lap, lapping, up against the sides all night. And in the morning early I should wake, and the sun would just be rising over a new land—quite a new one; but not a desert island—deserts are no fun. There should be plenty of people, all amusing ones, and they should all be standing on the shore to meet me, and when I jumped out, they would say, 'Why, Nancy, here you are at last! We've been waiting ages for you.' And then I should find I knew

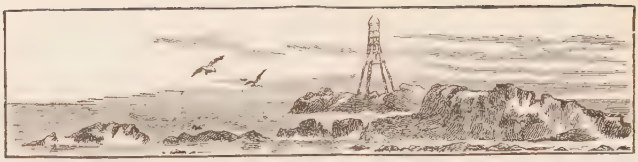
them, and that somehow *they* were my real people after all, and I would be a sort of queen, with all the fun and none of the stupid ceremony and fuss, of course, and we should all live happily ever after. What lovely times we should have!"

Here again she sighed, a little sigh of rapturous imaginings; her eyes grew fixed and dreamy, a look scarcely less blissful in its way than Hester's came into her face. So she knelt motionless, for longer than she knew. Suddenly she jumped up laughing, and tossed on her hat.

"What nonsense!" she exclaimed. "What is the matter with me this afternoon? Why, there is Sir Henry already. All right, coming, your highness, coming! Now I'm going to be good."

And downstairs, three or four steps at a time she went, and assisted submissively at the building of his unimpeachable

castles as to the future of a model country gentleman, even to his hints of what would be expected of the model country gentleman's wife. She had asked herself what was the matter, but most likely she knew better than she chose to say, for Anne, flighty and in some respects childish as she was, was by no means deficient in shrewdness. To-day, without shrinking, indeed, but with weariness rather than with enthusiasm, she scented battle. The change was subtle in the extreme, yet she felt, and more than ever after their tête-à-tête, that a change there was. She was still herself, and as willing as ever to give herself on the original terms—those of the strictest liberty, equality and fraternity. But, while she remained unchanged, he was different; the prig was fast blossoming into the autocrat. Henry had not become Sir Henry for nothing.



CHAPTER III.

TAKING POSSESSION.

RIDGELANDS, the property of Sir Henry Stephens, Bart., was quite a show place in its neighbourhood. It was not very big, nor very grand, nor at all historical, but it was very beautiful. The brown stone house, built in no particular style of architecture and with more regard to effect than to convenience, stood on the very crest of a hill. This stretched out behind into a wide and rather dreary table-land, comparatively treeless and largely laid out in turnips. But a strip of plantation shut out the grounds from the high-road on this

side, and the view from the other was not easily to be surpassed in that or any other county. Hill and valley, wood and water, nothing was wanting. Across the park, half pasture half woodland, the eye wandered over a voluptuous confusion of rich, soft, yet boldly rounded hills; or plunged into glen-like valleys, emerald-green, where, here and there, picturesque stone cottages stood, friendly looking yet isolated, like so many hermitages, and little brooks came tumbling out of the steep woods to glide quietly through the meadows. On and on, till hill and wood and valley took the blue velvety tints of distance; and so further still till, across the narrow strip of far-off fertile plain, the river, distinguishable only as a wide silver ribbon, flowed almost at the foot of the range of misty hills which closed the horizon,—hills misty always with

a mysterious cloud of their own from the coal-mines hidden there among the forest, a cloud which the setting sun glorified into a perfect haze of enchantment.

Beautiful at all times, the place was looking nearly at its best on the afternoon in May when Sir Henry, with his family, mounted the endless wall-like hills from the nearest posting-town to take official possession of his inheritance. He had been up to the house before by himself, more than once, but this was to be the time of his ceremonial induction, and he had sent for his family to share his triumph. They were all there, except Mary and Jack, for Jim had been granted a brief holiday for the grand occasion. Henry had sent the carriage, but he himself rode down to meet them. Jim would fain have ridden back in his stead, but his brother had reasonable doubts of his powers, and

declined to make the exchange. He himself rode as he danced, as if he had been thoroughly well taught and had conscientiously profited by the lesson; his style was irreproachable, but it smacked of the academy. However, he looked very well, in the eyes of his family, as he rode alongside the carriage.

Perhaps, on the whole, this was the happiest moment of their lives. The expectation of a life-time had been fulfilled, and the fulfilment surpassed the expectation. And there was no false pride about them to prevent their showing it. Mrs. Stephens, blissfully conscious of every item of satisfaction, from the crest on the carriage panels to her first fashionably made gown, Henry's present, beamed like the sun in a child's picture-book; the twins, frankly ecstatic, shrieked and giggled without reproof. When, after

mounting the last hill and driving through the last toll-bar, Henry pointed to a band of shining beech-trees just inside a low stone wall on the left, and said, "Ridgelands," a scarcely repressed scream ran round the carriage, though the sight itself was not particularly striking.

A little further on they came to a small house, in a break of the plantation. A little girl, in a washed-out cotton frock and torn straw hat, was sitting astride the garden fence, among three or four patched and shock-headed boys, evidently her brothers, and as the carriage drew near they all waved frantically, shouting: "Hooray! hooray! Happy and glorious! Long may he reign!" The girl, snatching off her scarecrow of a hat, began to flourish it triumphantly. But in the fulness of her enthusiasm she stood up, and overbalancing herself, with a lurch and a

shriek, tumbled headlong into the ditch by the road-side. Her brothers watched her disappear with calm indifference, but Henry sprang from his horse and went to the rescue. By the time he reached her she was on her feet again, apparently none the worse for her tumble, though her freckled, and not over-clean, little face was further beautified by several scratches.

"My dear Elizabeth," he said, "you should be more careful; and do you think you were in a very nice position for a young lady? I never saw one of *my* sisters sitting so. As for you, boys, don't you know that it is a gentleman's business to help ladies? It ought not to have been left for me to go to your sister's assistance."

"Oh! you may trust Bet to take care of herself," said the quartet cheerfully.

"I'm not a young lady, and I can help myself; I don't want anybody bothering

after me," exclaimed Elizabeth, simultaneously and indignantly.

Henry sighed and shook his head, but did not continue the argument. He remounted and rode after the carriage, which had halted a little further on.

"What dreadful children!" exclaimed Mrs. Stephens; "and to live so near the house too. Who are they, Henry? The gamekeeper's?"

"Well, no. It is sad, but I am sorry to say they are the children of our good chaplain. They have the misfortune to be motherless, which no doubt partly accounts for their neglected condition. Still I can't help thinking that their father —a most excellent man, you will meet him this evening at dinner—might do more for his family. When we are somewhat better acquainted, I must mention that point."

"Your chaplain! My word, Henry,

you *are* going the swell! Whatever do you want with a chaplain?"

"Gently, Jim; gently, my dear fellow. I understand you, but you should speak more carefully, for the sake of other people," glancing at the twins and the coachman. "Mr. Jones is not my private chaplain, as you seem to suppose. The late Lady Stephens built a little chapel for the use of the tenantry on the estate; it is a simple but appropriate edifice, you can see it from the drawing-room windows it stands at the end of the park. At the same time, she left provision in her will for a permanent stipend of a chaplain to serve the same. Mr. Jones is not the first, he was appointed only a few years before the late Sir Robert's death. He was a widower when he came."

"Well, in my humble opinion, a man's first duty is to his own household," said

Mrs. Stephens. "A clergyman's family, too; such a bad example to the neighbourhood. That little girl seems even a worse tom-boy than Anne used to be."

"Ah, Anne!" said Henry, smiling. "Yes, it will do all the good in the world to have a lady in the great house again. The squire's wife will be a mother to those children, yet one with whom they will not venture to take liberties; and that is only one of many happy reforms that I foresee. There is a great deal to be done, but we must have a little patience; the neglect of years cannot be put right in a day or two."

Mrs. Stephens had not a very clear mind, but she did see that this speech was something of a *non sequitur*. In her mind, at least, the mention of Anne did not naturally lead up to a glowing vision of reform, and she did not quite believe it had that effect on Henry. Fortunately

she had no time to brood over this rebuff, to which, for the rest, she was accustomed on that subject. For even as he spoke they were turning in at the lodge gates, under a triumphal arch of evergreens and white calico, on which large red letters bade them "Welcome," and the lodge-keeper and his wife were bowing and curtseying at the door, and the horses swept down the curved approach between the laurels and beech trees in fine style, and then they had drawn up at the foot of a sloping lawn, before an imposing Ionic porch, approached by a flight of wide, low steps, and guarded by two impressive lions, life size. And then Henry, springing to the ground, flung open the carriage door, handed out his mother, and kissing her respectfully on the brow, said, "Welcome to Ridgelands!" To be sure there are moments in life worth living for.

This was on Monday afternoon; the dinner to the tenants and so forth was to be on Friday. On the intervening days the neighbours called plentifully, and Mrs. Stephens was in her glory. Of course they came prepared to criticise, but it was a good-natured neighbourhood on the whole, and the new family passed pretty well. After all, the excitement was not so great as it might have been; it was known that Sir Henry would be bringing home a bride before the year was out, and naturally the greatest interest was reserved for her.

Henry was gratified by the civility, but it was to the Friday he looked as to the starting-point of his new life. He had the feudal sentiment very strongly, towards his inferiors. He would be the father of his people, and had not the smallest intention of letting his paternal government be a mere name. To know all and order all,

to advance and to repress, to reward and to punish, in short to be an earthly Providence, venerated and irresponsible, that was his idea of perfect happiness. Add to rebuke and to commend, for a satisfaction that was speechless would have been but a tempered one to Henry Stephens.

His joy, on the great day, was far from being speechless. He sent Anne the county paper with the report of the proceedings, and with it a courteous lover's note, hoping she would think he had done justice to her expectations. Anne read most of that elaborate account. She noted carefully that Mrs. Stephens, mother of the new baronet, had worn a confection of silk, *gris de perle*, elegantly festooned with black lace, while his sisters were charming in simple costumes of white *mousseline d'Inde* relieved by mauve ribbons of a peculiarly chaste shade. She studied the

list of distinguished guests, and paused, with a curious smile, over "the dignified affability, and that tact—more than courtly, for it is the outcome of a generous heart," which marked Sir Henry's manner to high and low. But she skipped the speech. "I shall hear plenty before I've done with it," she said, in the singularly unloverlike tone in which she always referred to her engagement.

Yet it had been a very good speech, as she had said it would be, and Henry's affability won better than a dubious smile among his neighbours. It was really very delightful to see him standing on the sunny terrace, in front of the open windows from which the fashionable crowd had just emerged, surrounded by the pearl-grey, the white and mauve, and all the rainbow tints of his guests, saying appropriate words to each group of humble friends as

it came up. Mr. Jones stood a little behind him. He was a grey, timid-looking man, with a crushed, subdued appearance, as though life had been too hard for him to struggle with, and he had resigned himself to let things take their chance. From time to time, when memory failed, Henry would turn to him and refresh it in a rapid murmur. He had been coached for many days past in the biography of every family on the estate, and had all the particulars beautifully entered in a note-book; but of course he could not produce this openly, and the tax on his memory was severe. As every fresh group bore in sight, Mr. Jones would murmur the name, and Henry, rapidly reviewing his entries, would be ready with an appropriate remark. He patted the babies on the head, and never mistook their gender. He knew how many children there were in each family,

how many were grown up, and to whom they were married. He admired the old women's shawls, and, discreetly to their mothers, the young ones' looks. He presented to the notice of the company, with much proper feeling, the oldest labourer on the estate, referring very happily to his memories of the festivities at the late Sir Robert's christening. In fact from first to last, from the first hand shake to the last of the Roman candles, Henry was a success.

One exception only there was to his popularity; and who could have thought that important? The little Joneses that afternoon wandered about, rather disconsolately, on the outskirts of civilization. A painful consciousness of their best clothes restrained them from joining the democracy, and of the aristocracy—when not engaged in playing practical jokes on

them—they stood in holy horror. From time to time their father's eyes wandered anxiously towards them, and he was perceptibly relieved when they moved off. Among the burdens of his life, his children were not the least. They had the high spirits and energy which had attracted him to their mother, but quite untempered by her discretion. They loved their father and pitied him; if her age had admitted of it, Elizabeth, at least, would have gladly dragged and carried him through life, just as her mother had done before her. Failing this, they were content to allow him to teach them, and in all else to manage themselves, without an interference which only disturbed him and inconvenienced them. Only occasionally would they refrain from following their own sweet will out of consideration to their father's prejudices. They were not, perhaps, really bad

children ; but sharp-tongued, quick-witted, and unvenerating, they were odiously disagreeable. To incur their dislike was to enter upon a conflict from which it was scarcely possible to emerge with dignity ; brute force might conquer, but the laugh—of the rest of the neighbourhood—was generally on their side.

Sir Henry was already their pet aversion. No liberality in sweets and tips could ever have made Henry a popular man with children ; his manner was utterly against him. These children he had tried to improve rather than to conciliate ; and they were none the less resentful of the unbaited hook because they would have despised the bait.

Still it had not come to a declaration of open war. Perhaps it never would have done so, but that the day after the tenants' dinner happened to be wet. In the weari-

ness of the Saturday holiday, they took refuge from the crossness of the Saturday household, and the tedium of everlasting quarrelling, in an amusement which had often served their turn before, and by which they protested, to the end of their Ridgeland days, they had meant no particular offence.

"I told Harry I thought he had better not," said Elizabeth, through her tears, on the day, months later, when circumstances brought this first iniquity only too clearly to remembrance. "But he said it was only a joke, and nobody on earth could be taken in by such a thing as that. But I was pretty sure, at the time, that *he* could be got to believe anything. And you see I was right," she ended, rubbing the wisps of hair out of her wet eyes with a rueful laugh.

So it came to pass that, towards the

dusky close of that day of rain, the monotony was broken by the arrival of a note for Sir Henry Stephens. It had been brought by a groom, the butler said, and there was no answer. The groom in fact was Henry's own, an ancient ally of the chaplaincy, but this Mr. Rudge did not think it necessary to state; perhaps, indeed, he did not know. The note was addressed in a bold, rather sprawling hand; and Henry coloured with pleasure as he read it.

"Duties are not long in finding me out, mother," he said, as he laid it down, "but certainly this is an honour I did not expect."

"Is it,—oh! Henry—have you been chosen High Sheriff?"

"Well, not quite that," said Henry, with benign playfulness, "no doubt that is to come. This too will be a somewhat

expensive charge, and under ordinary circumstances I might hesitate to accept it. But one owes something to courtesy in such a case as this; an unprecedented honour, I might say, to one almost a stranger."

"Have they made you a Justice of the Peace?"

"Have they asked you to stand for the county?"

"No, no; guess again. You can't? Well then——"

"Master of the Hounds?" shouted Jim.

And Henry, smiling, said, "You have it."

"Oh! bosh," said Jim; "look here, some fellow has been trying to take you in. Why, Lord Stonehouse has been Master of the Hounds for the last twenty years."

"Gently Jim. I am quite aware of that.

But it appears that his lordship is about to resign."

"Don't you believe it; look here, I'll ask Will if you like. He'll be sure to know."

"My good fellow," said Henry, with a touch of impatience, "he can't know nearly so well as I do, who have the fact here in black and white."

"I tell you it's just a sell. If it was ever so true about Lord Stonehouse, which I'll bet you anything you please it isn't, how on earth can you believe they would pitch on you?"

"And why not, James?" said Mrs. Stephens, awfully.

"Because they're not such fools as I must say most of them look," he explained with fraternal candour.

"That, my dear boy, is your opinion," said Henry, with a dignified smile; "support it by arguments and, though it is

crudely expressed, we are prepared to listen to reason."

"He has no reason," said his Spartan mother; "he can have no reason, unless a nasty, unbrotherly, unchristian, jealous temper can be called one. I am surprised, James, surprised and shocked; this from the curly-headed little boy, who used to sit on my knee and ask for the story of Cain and Abel? No, not another word. Pray, Henry, don't argue with him."

Jim who, at nineteen, was like the twins, the victim of a family tradition of eternal infancy, had come, also like the twins, to accept the theory outwardly, with a humorous interior joy at its great remoteness from facts. Now he went through a rapid pantomime of rubbing his knuckles into his eyes, with a silent howl, which sent the appreciative twins off into one of their fits of giggling, and

created a diversion. For the rest, when he learned that the note gave Henry a rendezvous at the kennels at eleven o'clock on Monday morning, he determined not to spoil sport; and, though his own opinion of the affair remained unaltered, he made no further attempts to convince his brother. His only regret was that he would not be there to see; uncle Barling, a rigid disciplinarian, having insisted on his return by the first coach on that very Monday.

No misgivings troubled Henry, that morning, as he set out for his long ride. He was dressed and mounted to perfection, and brimming over with affability. As for doubting the genuineness of the letter he would as soon have suspected Magna Charta to be a forgery. The style was so singularly like his own, so inexpressibly well-worded and correct, that it lent itself to the delusion. (It had, in fact, been

very carefully adapted from a specimen in the Polite Letter Writer, stolen from the cook's drawer when her back was turned.) The ride was a long and, after two days incessant rain, a muddy one; and Henry had little idea till then what country mud can be. When he at last reached his destination, he was by no means as faultless in appearance as when he set out; splashed and spattered, all the freshness was lost. He knew this, and experienced a subdued irritation. He was rather late, too—he had lost his way once or twice among the cross roads—and this also annoyed him; he would have to apologize. But as he looked along the hawthorn scented lane no polite and smiling cavaliers were in sight. Behind the hedge was an indistinct vision of boys, and a man was leaning over the gate which led to the kennels; that was all.

Henry drew rein and looked at his watch. Yes, it was certainly twenty minutes past eleven, and yet he was the first arrival. It was odd; but, in the country, people are not trained to business habits. He sat still, regaining his composure as he looked about him. The man at the gate stared leisurely at him with some curiosity, but took no further notice. He was a big, red-faced, elderly man, looking as if he had been pitchforked into his ill-fitting clothes; he wore a shaby, "chaw-bacon" sort of hat, and was smoking a short pipe. No doubt he was the keeper of the kennels; perhaps the importance of office had spoiled him for that feudal deference which Henry expected from his inferiors.

"Good morning, my man," he said, pleasantly but with dignity; "I hope you'll know me again when you see me."

The man raised his eyes in one prolonged stare; then he was understood to say, in language whose strength rather obscured its meaning, that he rather thought he should. A titter came through a gap in the hedge across the lane.

"I could understand you as well without such vile language. Listen, my man; I don't know what you may have been accustomed to under the old management, but perhaps you are not aware that I am at the head of affairs now, and you had better understand, once and for all, that this sort of thing won't do for me. A civil tongue in your head now, if you please, and remember who you are talking to.

From red the keeper turned purple; he gasped for breath, and at last getting under way, with a rush of yet worse language than before, he yelled—

"Barker!"

A man came running out in a great hurry.

"Yes, my lord."

"Turn out that young jackanapes; bring me the dog-whip; set the hounds on him! I'll soon let him know who *he's* talking to."

Henry sat transfixed. But as the man was turning away he found his voice at least.

"Stop a moment, my friend; there seems to have been a little mistake. Am I not speaking to the keeper of the kennels?"

"No, sir; you're not, sir. You're giving your confounded impudence to me, sir; to Lord Stonehouse, and what's more to the Master of the Hounds, sir! And who are you, sir?"

Henry did not recoil, because his horse would not; but he fairly turned white and felt giddy.

"I—I must apologize. I was given to understand——"

At this moment a young rustic came slouching down the lane.

"A letter, muster."

It was on the same paper, in the same hand as the one on Saturday. Half beside himself with confusion and shame, Henry tore it open. The next moment the paper fluttered from his hand; he was on the ground, shaking the boy with positive fury, while his riding-whip came down fast and furious on his shoulders.

"Who did this? Whose insolence are you abetting?" he gasped between his clenched teeth.

The boy writhed and yelled.

"Oh! please, sir, 'twasn't me, sir. I don't know what's in it—boo-hoo—nobody ever learned me to read. It was them boys, sir; they sent me."

And he pointed to two figures rapidly disappearing across the field.

Henry flung the boy from him, and with something of a tragic gesture turned to Lord Stonehouse, who had picked up the paper and now stood with it open in his hand, and an unconcealed grin on his face. The paper contained merely one pointed couplet—

> "Fool, fool, go to school,
> And learn to keep by each good rule."

"If you have quite taken in the meaning of that document, my lord, I will trouble you to return it," he said. "It may be wanted as evidence."

"Bless you," said his late adversary with a chuckle,—he had quite recovered his temper under the influence of this excellent joke; "you don't want evidence. Everybody in this neighbourhood knows their style of humour by this time."

"Whose style?"

"The chaplain's children at Ridgelands."

"*My* chaplain's children?"

"Perhaps. You forget I don't know who you are. But they are impudent little beggars, and if you have such a good chance, they would certainly be none the worse for a thrashing. Not that you need flatter yourself they'll mind; I've tried it myself. So you are Sir Henry Stephens?"

He glanced again at the writing and then at Henry, and went off into a roar of laughter. Henry snatched the paper from his unresisting hand, flung himself on his horse, and, barely lifting his hat, set off at a gallop, his spurs plunged deep into the poor animal's sides.

To do the culprits justice, they had not planned the meeting with Lord Stonehouse. That was a rich relish thrown by Fate into their own simpler brew of mischief. At

most they had calculated on giving the victim a long, muddy, wild-goose chase and an indefinite wait at the end. On the whole, perhaps, they were nearly as much frightened as pleased at the *dénouement.*

They had some reason to be frightened, and more seriously than for a mere thrashing, however severe ; a thrashing and have done with it. For they had incurred that steadiest and least appeasable of hatreds, the hatred of a vain man humiliated for the first time in his own eyes, made a public laughing-stock in the very hour of his proudest triumph. From that hour, Sir Henry's plans for his chaplain's family savoured less of reformation than of elimination.

CHAPTER IV.

"A LADY WAITING TO SEE YOU, SIR."

THE two marriages were, at last, fixed for the beginning of September; in this, at least, Mrs. Paton was to have her wish, the sisters were to be married on the same day. Meanwhile, for George and Hester the course of true love did, for once, run smooth; ran on, through the golden summer hours, between banks that were all roses, in a world where all was peace.

Sweet were the hours when, lying on the grass at Hester's feet—Hester, in white, as he best loved to see her, throned on cushions at the foot of the old mulberry-

tree—he would try to teach her the old flower-spell, from the daisies twinkling in the mossy turf. She knew little of the pretty conceits of love; it was his pleasure to win her from her demureness, to try to inform her pure and sober simplicity with something of the glow and colour of his own devotion, then to exult secretly in his own ill-success. If it had lain in his power to change her, he would not have altered her by a shade. Sweet it was to linger on till all the sunset colours had faded out of the sky, and the first stars began to glitter, silver points in the faint blue, infinitely far, and the dew came upon the world like a mysterious creation, noiseless, invisible, yet all at once existent. Sweet to go together to church on Sundays, and there to share the same hymn-book, because George had managed to forget his; to stand, side by side, in the sunshine which

streamed down in a dusty golden shaft, through the ugly square-paned window, to rest, like a visible blessing, upon the white ribbon of the girl's simple straw-bonnet and upon the man's bowed head. All this was in itself sweet—sweeter than all "by the shall be hereafter." And that was drawing on.

George had not changed his lodgings when better days began. His tastes were not luxurious, and so long as he could find cleanliness and respectability he was content with very simple fare and homely quarters. For Hester his thoughts were different, yet even for Hester his dreams were of some superlative daintiness rather than of splendour. Still there were points their home must not be without. It must have a garden ; if it could be in the country, at a possible distance from his work, he would be glad. Grass for her feet, dappled

shadow of elm-trees in the lane to play upon her face and hair; flowers for her to love; birds and animals to flutter and press about her with mute pleadings for her caresses. The chime of Sunday bells among the woodlands, borne upon a summer wind across the golden pastures—this was a fancy which often came to him when he thought of her. That, too, he would have liked to have realized in the home that was to be.

He was thinking of it one Monday evening, as he walked along the dusty side-street towards his lodgings. To be going back, but not to home, because not to Hester; every Monday brought him that experience, after his two days of paradise, as if it were a new and unnatural thing, and every week he smiled to think it was one week less. He smiled now, as he stood waiting at the shabby door. The street,

still in sunshine, had a dry, baked, powdered look at the end of a day of midsummer fervour; withal, an indescribable effect of evening suggested revival. It was a dull street, bald, ugly, mean in every way; but just at this hour it took on a sort of humanity. For these few moments of ending labour, those dusty, unmeaning, soulless iterations of brick and mortar gained a certain individuality. They became felt as homes. Every click of a key in the lock, every lifting of tired eyes to some upper window, every patter of little feet towards an opening door, put something into them that had not been there before. A great home-coming over half the world. Soon, now, George too would be coming home; the soft light of that vision was in his grave eyes, in all his yet stern face, as he turned towards his opening door.

"There's a—*lady*—waiting to see you, sir."

George stared, as well he might.

"Not for me, Mrs. Reece, it must be a mistake."

"And so I should have said, Mr. Paton, if you'll excuse *me*. It ain't for me to make remarks on the company my gentlemen may please to keep, but I've 'eld myself respectable, and I've 'eld my 'ouse respectable, and ladies as won't give their names nor their business, nor yet won't take no for an answer, may suit some folks, but they don't suit me. Let alone ladies as wants me to send for brandy—saving your presence—into a gent's rooms, before they've been in it a quarter of an hour."

"Good heavens!"

"'Taint the 'evins as is concerned with such goings on, and sorry I am 'tis to you I should 'ave to say it."

"My good woman, you may say anything you like so far as it can affect me," said George frigidly. "As for this person," he went on in another tone, "if she won't move for you, we must see if we can't find somebody for whom she will."

He raised his voice purposely, as he said the last words, and that voice had something of the penetrative and carrying power of his father's. He paused a moment, in the act of taking his hat again from the peg, to see the result. A door opened above, the door of his own room; a woman's face peered over the banisters, into the perpetual and fast increasing dimness of the entrance passage.

"*Is* that George?"

It was only for three seconds that George faltered. Then he pushed the landlady aside and strode up the stairs.

"Mother!" he cried; "why, mother!"

He drew her into the room and closed the door. There was a strange foreboding at his heart, a foreboding to which he could give no name. After all, it was not strange that she should come. For some months past, he had not had the least idea where his parents might be. That they had left London he knew, but, beyond that, nothing. Mrs. Paton was no better letter-writer in her age than she had been in her youth; from her he had expected no communication, from his father no news was the best he could hope for. So that there was really no reason why they should not be back in town, nothing odd in his mother's coming, after long months of absence, to comfort herself a little in her son. And yet—— He tried to shake off the feeling, but with little success; it was most like the half supernatural shudder that comes upon the earth with an eclipse.

The room, a back room looking on a blank wall, was dim and gloomy with premature twilight. Already it had lost something of him, the semi-monastic orderliness and correctness, to put on something of the visitor. Her bonnet lay on the table, all abroad, veil, strings, everything hanging and flying; on the black horse-hair sofa were marks of dusty boots; the crochet antimacassar had slipped in a heap on to the floor. On a chair was a little hand-basket, from which came a mingled odour of oranges and spirit—brandy. Realizing which, George's face grew set; the light had faded from it long ago. Without a word he turned to the window, and threw it open. Then he looked at his mother for the first time.

She had sunk down on the sofa again, this time in a sitting posture. She was wofully untidy, as usual; her gown, dis-

arranged by lying down and dusty as with long travel, bore marks, unmistakable to him, of having been adapted from the theatrical wardrobe. He knew this, and he knew what it meant; she was never particular about her dress, but it was a sign of bad times indeed when she came to that. His eyes, recognizing this flag of distress, travelled slowly to her feet; they were shod only in old velvet slippers, in which the stitches that had once held the rosettes were plainly visible. The chill grew about his heart, till he looked at her face—then every other feeling was swallowed up in one sharp, honest, natural pang.

"Mother, you have been ill—are ill!"

She smiled. Worn, harassed, lined, the once lovely complexion long since ruined by cosmetics and now white with a deathly yellow whiteness, blue about the lips, her

brow glistening with the dew of a mortal faintness, she smiled; and the smile, weak as it was, was the unforced, even the jolly, smile of her girlhood.

"It's all right, my dear," she gasped; "I shall be better directly, now you have opened the window. I wanted to do it before, but I couldn't. It's all right . . . there's nothing to be frightened at; I'm often so."

She was still sitting up; he put the cushion behind her as well as he could. She could speak with difficulty, but speak, say what he might, she would.

"It's my heart . . . a kind of weakness. I ought by rights to have had some brandy . . . the doctor said it wasn't safe for me to be without it. I did put some in an old medicine bottle at the inn this morning . . . but I couldn't find the right cork, and, before I knew, there it was

all about among the sandwiches . . . and I asked here . . ."

George sprang to his feet; he had been kneeling by his mother's side, rubbing her chilly hands. He snatched the bottle from the basket, and, with one reassuring word, rushed from the room and out of the house. The old passion of penance was upon him; the unuttered suspicion of those first few minutes seemed monstrous to him, unnatural to loathing, scarcely to be atoned for. When he had got his bottle filled at the nearest public-house, the eager curiosity of the little maid-of-all-work who opened the door on his return, the eloquent toss of the landlady's head as she looked out of her room, were rather a satisfaction to him than otherwise. It would have pleased him, just then, to humiliate himself in the eyes of others as much as he was humiliated in his own.

Mrs. Paton gradually revived under the influence of the stimulant, but even so the change in her appearance was enough to shock and startle her son. She seemed little disturbed herself.

"There's nothing to be frighened about, it soon goes off. You know I've had fainty turns for ever so long; this is just the same thing, only a bit stronger. It's worry, my dear, and that's just the whole truth. I've been that worried of late the only wonder is that there should be any heart left in me at all. But it will be all right, now."

She looked at him, as who should say: "Who will dare call me an unhappy woman, who am the mother of this son?"

"Tell me all about it, if you feel able," said George.

He had laid her upon the sofa again,

had covered her with a rug, and done his best to supply a more comfortable pillow than the hard and slippery bolster. Now he drew a chair to her side and sat down.

"I came to tell you; that's just why I did come. You may think I might have written and saved the fare—goodness knows I've had to look twice at a penny for some time past. But I'm a poor hand with a pen, and there's things that seem to want words more than most. So, as I wasn't on in to-night's piece (and for anything else I might as well be here as there, for all the good I can do), why, I just put my traps in a bag, and came along. But I wouldn't tell the folks who I was; I wouldn't like to make you ashamed."

"Oh! hush. But you speak of not being on to-night. Surely, surely, mother, you are not acting now!"

"Acting! This same blessed evening

(and a blessed one it is that gives me a sight of your face again!) is the first holiday, barring the night before, I've seen for many a long week."

"You are killing yourself."

"So the doctor says. But I tell him, if die I must, I would sooner it were in harness. That's what I tell *him*, because family affairs are family affairs, and might as well stay in the family; of course, the company, for the time being, that's the same thing. But I'll tell *you*, my dear—and right glad I am to get it off my tongue at last—I'll tell you, it's just a choice between that and the workhouse."

George gave one look of incredulous horror; the incredulity did not last a moment.

"Good heavens!" he said again, and dropped his head on his hands.

"You don't seem just able to see me in

the workhouse, do you?" Mrs. Paton went on, with positively a faint echo of her genial laugh at the idea. "Blue check, and skilly, and all the rest of it! *I* don't think that's how I'll end my days, either."

George made a gesture of deprecation, and she stopped.

"How long have things been so bad?"

"Well, you see, I couldn't exactly tell that; it has been growing, as one might say. They have never gone just right since you left, all more or less down hill; but quite of late, these last three months, perhaps, we seem to have been going down with a run."

"Where have you been?"

"Everywhere mostly; just now, at Bristol. I have been lucky in getting something rather better there, for the time. When I say better, it is a sort of thing I

should have turned up my nose at, once; but beggars mustn't be choosers, and I know I'm not as young as I was. Still, it isn't such hard, not such poor, work as strolling; we might manage to get along now, if only your father won't lose me the engagement. Now the murder's out."

"I supposed he was at the bottom of it," said George, bitterly enough.

"Going to the dogs, my dear, as fast as he can go. And it's no manner of use my talking; there! you might as well talk to that chair. But you know that."

"How was it?"

"Well, my dear, it began this way. Just after you left, nothing would suit him but he must try managing again. I said to him, 'William Paton, for a clever man I'm thinking I never saw a bigger fool.' And no more I did. Well! it was bad enough when you were there, and how he

expected to carry it through between only him and me, goodness only knows! But it was throwing words away. He got his company together—and a good one it was, I will say that much for him. He took a little theatre, a tidy place enough, down at Tunbridge Wells, and started."

"And failed."

"If that had been all! I'm thinking we're pretty well used to that, aren't we? No; this affair blew up sky-high—let him down in a police court. One month."

"Mother!"

"Ah! and there was I, standing by at the time, if he felt like hitting out; and well he might have known I should never have brought him into court. But, no; he must needs let fly at Cecilia Montressor—and an aggravating minx she was, there's no denying it."

"He—used violence?"

"Well, it was only one of the pasteboard goblets, it happened to catch her in the eye; no such great matter. I'll answer for it, it's not the first black eye she's had in her time. Her father kept the Ring and Gloves public; all the prize-fighters used to go there. He was a tolerably good boxer himself, and I know he used to practise on his family, at times—to keep his hand in, I suppose. She told me so herself; Sally Grimes she was then."

"Don't, mother."

"Well, I won't. So, you see, that was the end of it. It's true that, even without this, we must have shut up that shop the next week. Of course it hadn't paid."

"How could it?"

"That's what I told him all along. So there was a month settled. I got along somehow; people were very kind to me,

and your father was provided for by government. But that wouldn't keep him for ever, and the worst began when he was out again."

"He couldn't find employment?"

Mrs. Paton shook her head.

"Oh, yes, he *found* it quick enough! There's many a manager was willing to take him on, for no one has ever denied he can act still; besides, there was his old name. And then, to be sure, it was years since I'd seen him look so respectable. You can't think what a month's regular living had done for him. But it seemed as though all the respectability had got to the outside. Pretty soon he took to the old thing again, only worse than ever."

"That will do; I can guess the rest."

"Well, perhaps you can. It was change after change; he found things, but he

couldn't keep them; until at last, as I said, I had to take to the boards again. But I can't keep him steady, you know I never could, and this way he is ruining both of us. So I came to see if you wouldn't come back."

"I'm afraid that can't be," said George, shaking his head with a mournful little smile, as if at an ill-timed but well-intentioned joke.

And as such, at the moment, he considered it. Through all that had gone before, no suspicion of this conclusion had come to him. It was a stupendous impossibility; the idea would be extravagant even for a nightmare; a suggestion too preposterous even to excite alarm. He took her hand and stroked it tenderly.

"Poor mother," he said; "poor dear mother; we must see what can be done."

"There is nothing else that can be any

good," said Mrs. Paton. "You know what your father is; he has been worse ever since you left. Didn't you know he was vexed about that?"

"You dreamed it!"

"No. Oh, you may believe me! I'm not saying that his heart was broken, and he got reckless because of that. But he didn't like losing the money—Mrs. Chamberlain's money. Naturally he wouldn't; but till you were gone, George, I didn't know myself what a hold that gave you over him. You see, he knew that, if he didn't keep tolerably respectable, he wouldn't get it. Ah, he could never get round you, my dear!" she said admiringly. "But now there's nothing certain to be got by keeping decent, so he doesn't care to try. He was always a practical sort of man—in his way."

Through the horror of great darkness,

which he felt closing in upon him with every word, broke a ray of hope, lovely as life itself. It was well nigh the last.

"But that can be easily managed. Take it, mother, take it all. It shall be paid you in instalments, weekly, monthly, anyhow you like; let him know you have money for him, conditional on his good behaviour."

"Me!" shrieked Mrs. Paton. "And what has come over you at all, at all, my dearie, that you should suppose I could keep the money five minutes, once he found out I had it to give?"

George was silent. He knew it to be impossible. He drew away, turned aside, hardened his heart, steeled his every nerve to desperate resistance against impending fate.

"It is impossible," he repeated aloud; and to himself, over and over, with monotonous tenacity of desperation: "Im-

possible; impossible." And knew, all the while, that the impossible would be.

"Oh, George, George, don't say that; don't send me back so! Oh, my dear, if you knew how I have missed you! If you don't care to come for his sake—and I'm bound to say it's little reason he has ever given you to care to do much for him—but if not for his sake, then for mine."

"Stay with me," he cried, stopping for an instant his pacing about the room.

"Dear, I couldn't; he would just haunt me. For I love him, George; I do, in spite of all—and all is more than even you know. I believe it is stupid, but I can't help it, and I shall never be able to help it till I die. Five and thirty years together, of all sorts! If there was nothing else, it has got into a habit by now; and I am too old to change, George, dear, too old to change."

He scarcely seemed to hear, as, indeed, he had scarcely known what it was he had proposed. He stood still now, gazing at her, but with vacant eyes.

"It is tearing my heart in two," she went on. "I think I didn't know till just now how I have missed you. I have wearied for your step upon the stair, for the sound of your voice. The backbone has gone out of the world since you went away, and I am tired, George—so tired! Oh, what can I do, what can I say, to bring you? When I tell you that if you don't come we are ruined, lost! George!" She struggled to her elbow, a horrible anxiety in her eyes. "George!" she cried again.

"You don't know what you ask. Mother, it is monstrous! I tell you I am to be married in less than two months time. Do you understand?"

It spoke volumes for the keenness of her anxiety that even this piece of news, heard now for the first time, did not send her off at a tangent in a sudden impulse of curiosity, but affected her chiefly as an obstacle to be overcome.

"Wouldn't your wife——"

"Hush! hush!" he cried wildly. "Don't finish, even with a word, even with a thought!"

"I would make her happy, George; I know I could. She should be mistress; I would make her gowns, do her hair—(she'll scarcely have more than I had in my good days, whoever she is; and then the other girls used to come and beg me for lessons). And if she took to the business, and wanted coaching——"

From a dream, which was becoming quite rosy and golden, she was aroused by an exclamation from George of a kind

very rare with him, and certainly never heard, even in imagination, before as addressed as an interruption to her.

"Did you hear me?" he continued, as she stared at him, less hurt and scandalized than surprised. "How can you bring yourself to think of such a plan! Have you forgotten what an unspotted, guarded girlhood is? Well, Heaven knows, you have had excuse enough for such forgetfulness, if you have; when, to me, it had become as a baseless dream! Do you think that, even if she were willing, in her innocent devotion, so to sacrifice herself, I would allow her to do so? when even the knowledge she must gain among that crew would be powerful for torture, if—*if*—it were impotent to harm. My wife among those men! Ah, those women! *My wife!*"

"Oh, George! it isn't before your

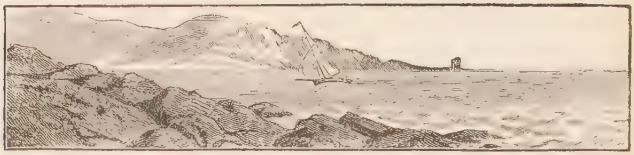
mother that you ought to speak as if the life was *impossible* for an honest woman."

It was plaintive rather than dignified; yet even so it was the nearest thing to a rebuke he had ever had from those lips. It brought him to his knees beside her, his lips against her feet. More than prayers and tears and flattery it helped to turn the scale. For the second time that afternoon, but now with infinitely greater force, his conscience rose against him clamouring for any, every sacrifice in reparation for the hasty impiety; and against that particular form of demand George had no strength.

"Forgive me, forgive me; I am mad, I think; but is there not a cause? And you—you have pardoned so much in your life; an angel of forgiveness, mother, —you must pardon me even this. It is a shock; you cannot understand, not even

your love can make you understand. But I will think, I will try; oh, believe me, I will try! Only grant me till to-morrow; let me give you my answer then."

"Dear, you shall give it when and how you like. Oh! I am a wicked mother to you; cruel, cruel! But only come, and I will love you so much that you must forgive me soon. Only come. Because I think sometimes—oh! whisper, darling—I think, sometimes, it mayn't be for very long."



CHAPTER V.

"'TWIXT CUP AND LIP."

GEORGE saw his mother off by the early coach, she blessing him aloud with her latest breath as they rolled away. After some argument she had been brought, however unwillingly, to see the impossibility of his returning with her then and there, and had contented herself with his promise of coming on in a week or ten days at the outside. Then he had gone to his work as usual; but he did not hold out for the whole day. Towards the afternoon restlessness came upon him, and he turned his steps towards Clapham. He could

not bring himself to tell any one, before he had told Hester. To his own feelings there was a sort of religious solemnity in the sacrifice he was preparing to make; the mere business part of the affair he could conduct, he thought, more coolly and practically, when nerved by her approval and sent forth with her blessing. For the sacrifice he contemplated was not, in this sense, final; it involved waiting, separation, it might be long silence, but no severing of bonds. It did not even occur to him to offer to set her free, any more than to offer her any other insult. Strong in the consciousness of making a supreme effort of virtue, an offering of piety agreeable at once to natural and revealed religion, he scarcely entertained an expectation of serious contradiction even from Captain Paton himself. His pain was the pain of an indefinite, not of

an eternal parting. Even so it was severe enough.

George did not go straight in without inquiry, as was his usual habit; he shrank from meeting any one but Hester. The mere asking if she were in gave him a certain shock of strangeness. She was out; the maid thought it was the afternoon on which she went to the school; if so she would not be long, school came out at four.

George hesitated a moment, then determined to go and meet her. From some upper floor he could hear Anne singing an air from the Nozze di Figaro; he could hear her laughter, with its elfish ring, running musically through the merry cataract of notes. It moved him this once, strangely enough, with a sort of envy; such envy as the heavy-hearted may sometimes feel of the summer insects, or of some free, happy, forest creature. To him, Anne always

seemed some such soulless being, incapable alike of love and pain; her happiness no higher in kind than that with which all nature's children thrill, and dance, and jubilate in the sunshine; her griefs as transitory, and as little profound, as the gloom and chill that come and pass with the shadow of a cloudy day. As a rule he despised her for this, so far as he thought of her at all; to-day it seemed a character not altogether ill to be desired. He sighed inwardly as he turned away, but as one may sigh, with a merely sentimental regret, for some fanciful good, which yet one would not accept if it were offered. He certainly had no wish to change natures with Anne.

There was only one road to the school, so he could not miss Hester; but he had nearly accomplished the whole distance before he saw her coming towards him,

like a figure of Charity, two little ones clinging to her skirts, a little tumbled head and sleep-flushed face resting on her shoulder. She carried the living weight with a matronly dignity, superadded to her maidenly grace, which was new to him, and which cost him a strange pang for the instinctive joy he had in it. Her whole face lighted up when she saw him.

"Oh, George, how good of you! Now I haven't even a hand for you; this poor baby fell asleep over the sewing, and she looked so sweet and happy I hadn't the heart to wake her afterwards, so I am carrying her home. It will take me a little way round, but, you see, I never expected you. Never mind, George; I like surprises. Now, are you coming with me?"

"Did you think I wasn't?"

Hester laughed gently. They walked on together, she prattling of all the history

which a day's absence can make for lovers, he silent, or answering only in monosyllables, till they reached the cottage for which they were bound. Hester delivered her sleeping burden into its mother's arms, kissed her two supporters, and turned away. Then, in an interval of silence, she looked up into her lover's face, and her own changed.

"There is something the matter, George. What is it?"

"What indeed! Who could ever guess what has happened since yesterday! Hester, I must—— Nay, let me tell you my story, and hear my duty from the lips that have taught it me so often. Last night my mother came to me——"

"Oh, do your parents object? I never thought of that," exclaimed Hester, smitten with sudden dismay.

"Reassure yourself," he said, not with-

out bitterness, "My mother has never offered an objection to any plan of mine in all her life. As for my father, I think it very improbable that he would volunteer an opinion which he would know to be valueless."

"Don't talk like that, dear,—even of Uncle Will."

"Not even of him! You don't think much of him, Hester, and you are right. But it is just to him that I am requested to sacrifice myself. Listen further. My mother came to me. Fit for nothing but an invalid's couch, she had found strength, in her despair, to struggle up all the way from Bristol to appeal to me. She arrived half dying—I do not exaggerate. She came to tell me of a man drinking himself to ruin, and her to death; yes, to death, for every night of the toil by which she strives to support them both is as a

seal to her death-warrant. Hester, that man whom only I can check (for not even I can rescue him) is my father; my mother is his victim."

"Poor George! How sad."

"And now, judge for me. But you will have done so already; I will not grieve you by making you put it into words. Let me rather take that pain upon myself; I wish I could take it all. Hester, I must leave you, I cannot say for how long; ah! love, help me against the sin of wishing the time unduly shortened, an impious wish since it involves a father's life."

There was a pause, during which he did not venture to look at her. On the whole, he was not sorry that his explanation was given under circumstances which made self-control, on both sides, a matter of necessity. In this requirement, Hester

did not fail. When at last she spoke, her voice indeed was tremulous, but that was only to be expected; it would have required a much more dispassionate analyst than George to decide exactly to what emotions the trembling was due.

"I thought you had quite given up all idea of going back to the old things," she said; "yet you talk as though that is what you mean to do."

"Can I help it? Surely you don't think it is for my own pleasure."

"Of course not; how could you misunderstand me so?" she said hastily. "Dear George, you are always so good!" Again she paused. When she next spoke, the uncertainty of her voice was more marked, and less doubtful in nature. It was, in point of fact, sheer fright. "Dear papa will be dreadfully annoyed."

She glanced at him askance, and was

honestly surprised to see no sign of sympathetic trepidation on his brow. She began to think she must have overrated the enormity of the proposal.

"But you will be very careful to explain to him that you have no intention of going on the stage again yourself. Because what you mean—isn't it?—is to get some respectable situation, somewhere where you can be near him and look after him. But oh, George dear!" she said, her soft eyes gently filling with tears, "must you go?"

"Answer the question for me."

She answered it with a sigh, very tender, very regretful, but quite assenting to the necessity of the step. But immediately her mind reverted, as with a horrible fascination, to her greatest dread.

"You will be sure and explain all that to papa. He will be angry; oh!" with a

little shudder, "he *will* be angry at first; but don't lose your temper, dear. Remember he is my father."

"I will not say a word that my dutiful love could disapprove; but I ought to tell you, at once, that to give such an assurance as you suggest is out of my power. It would not be fair. The plain truth is, that I may be obliged to take up my old profession again any day. For one thing, respectable situations are not easy to find for a man in my position—the son of a disreputable, broken down actor, always liable to turn up at inconvenient moments. Then, too, the wandering life—seldom over a month in one place—makes permanent work out of the question. Can you forgive me, that even this poor promise I cannot make you? Dear, I think you will love me better in your pure soul, that I shall have yet this further claim upon your pity and your prayers."

"I couldn't love you better," she said.

But, though George did not perceive it, the disclaimer was little more than mechanical. In fact, this climax of revelation had left her utterly aghast. Her eyes grew large, her cheeks blanched, her hands seemed turning to ice with terror.

"To go back to be an actor! Oh, George—papa! I really don't know *what* he will say."

"Dear one, your father may not be unprejudiced, but he is a good man; how often have you told me so? I think he will do justice to my motives. But even if he should not, Hester, will not our own sense of right and wrong be enough to support us?"

"Of course," said Hester, rapidly. "But if he should be *very* angry? You have never seen him so, I think; but I have. It is dreadful."

He drew her poor little trembling hand under his arm.

"You mustn't be afraid for me," he said, almost smiling, amused, while touched, by her solicitude. "I shall manage to bear it. If you understand and sympathize I can do without other approval, beyond that of my own conscience. And you do understand?" he went on with renewed earnestness. "Hester, if I go, as go I must, say that it is with your blessing."

"With my blessing, George dear," she repeated obediently. And as she looked up, smiling through tears, at that moment absolutely his ideal, it would have been strange indeed had he suspected that, just then, she would have repeated a dictated curse with about as much sense of what she was saying. Almost before she finished speaking, her grasp on his arm tightened convulsively. "Oh, George! what if he

should say we must break off our engagement?"

They were in the garden now. He turned round upon her with a look which made her regret the suggestion; but the next instant he took her in his arms.

"When you and I have left off loving, I will tell you what of that," he said, and his tone was almost gay. In fact, the sense of a crisis, and the suggestion of opposition, had done more than he was aware of to inspirit him. When, a little later, he entered the study with Captain Paton, he went, not of course with exultation, but without abject depression.

But his courage shed no cheering ray on Hester. From the landing she watched them, herself unseen; when the study door closed behind them she trembled visibly, and caught her breath, as though it had been the door of a chamber of the

Inquisition. She crept noiselessly back into the schoolroom. In a far corner was an old low chair, a relic of fireside evenings of bygone years; on this she cowered down, her arms crossed upon the back and her head on them, in a misery of nervous waiting. Thus Anne found her, by-and-by, and good-naturedly applied herself to comfort. It would be difficult to say how she had found out that matters were going wrong. Anne had a sort of instinct for anything in the nature of what she called a "shindy," and it is to be feared that the fascination such situations undoubtedly had for her was not exactly the fascination of horror. A few words were enough to explain the situation to her; and if interest could have comforted Hester, or the most vigorous moral backing sustained her drooping spirits, she would have found both, for once, in her sister.

But it was no use, and presently Anne dropped into silence, as she sat on the floor by Hester's side, listening as eagerly as the other, but without her nervous tension, to the muffled murmur that rose and swelled from the room below. The low rumble, gathering like thunder to a growl, and, as it were, a final crash, which represented Captain Paton's voice, was taking much the greater part in the argument, if argument it were. George's penetrative tones, of which the modulations were indistinguishable to the listeners, came now and again in pauses, briefly, and not unfrequently cut off short by that thunderous bass. Presently there was a sound of movement; quick, short alternations of voices, each gathering intensity after his kind. Then the silence of the house was shattered by the sharp, shrilling vibration of a bell. Hester turned

round, with a face almost tragic in its helplessness.

"That is for me," she said. "It is all over; I feel it, I know it."

"Nonsense," replied Anne; "that depends entirely upon yourself. What are you afraid of? Father can't murder you after all."

But Hester shook her head repeating, "It is all over;" and in another moment her presentiment was so far fulfilled that a summons did come from Captain Paton to the study.

"Now, keep a brave heart, and stand up for yourself; don't let anyone bully you into doing what you may be sorry for afterwards."

This was Anne's parting exhortation; but it was delivered to deaf ears, and she knew it. With a little gesture, half pity, half contempt, she turned back into the

room and took up her favourite position on the window-sill.

"I shouldn't wonder if she was right about it after all," she thought. "Hester has no courage; they won't need to bully her, she will give in at the fear of it. Well, poor George! I think he deserved better of her than that."

Wherewith she fell to humming again, and her thoughts, or dreams, floated off, on the summer breezes, to some realm best known to herself, where neither care nor passion had any part. A realm, if only by that test, measureless leagues away from where Hester stood on the threshold of the study, pale and piteous, holding the handle still in her hand, with the nervous attitude of a child.

Captain Paton, his face towards the door, was seated in the magisterial-looking chair of which she always had a secret

awe, and his aspect was certainly not reassuring.

"I sent for you, my daughter," he began, "on a painful subject. But trust me now, and you will live to thank me, under Providence, for saving you from sharing the doom of the backslider."

In the pause, Hester gave a little sob.

"Oh, don't father! don't say you want——"

"Now, my child, is the time for showing principle. This person——" he hesitated, from a suspicion that 'person,' as an expression of contumely, was, technically, of the feminine gender. "This individual, whom I had gathered to my domestic hearth, has proved a viper there. The true son of his father, to his father's ways will he return."

"It is to save him," she faltered.

"In judging of that, daughter," said the

Captain very stiffly, "you must be content to be guided by my experience. I do not expect you to be competent—it would be most undesirable that you should be competent—at your age, and with your happily limited opportunities, to track the self-deceiver to his mazy den. My own opinion is different; and I think I have some knowledge of human nature. But the question is of quite secondary importance."

"Indeed, father, I think it makes all the difference."

"Thought," replied the innocent plagiarist, "unregulated and unguided thought is a—a—is what the young would do well to distrust. Action, prompt, obedient and unreasoning, is what is required of them; of you. I am surprised; surprised and pained. *I* should have thought that, under all the circumstances, it would have been

an insult at once to your good feeling and your common sense to have to tell you, in so many words, that your engagement is instantly and irrevocably broken off. But it seems I must do so. Do you understand me now? *My* daughter was not promised to an actor.

He had worked up to his big voice; that speaking trumpet intonation before which Hester trembled even when heard from afar, in colloquy with some domestic culprit, and which she had scarcely, then, imagined it possible to resist and live. And now it was addressed to her.

"Don't! don't say it!" she prayed in hopeless deprecation, putting her clasped hands before her eyes, as if to ward off the sight of the thunder-bolt which must crush her.

"Don't say what?" thundered the Captain. "I have said that there is to

be an end of everything between you and him, and I'm not accustomed to speak more than once. To you, sir, I keep my word, little cause as you have given me to do so. Ten minutes will be granted you for your parting. At the end of that period . . . That over——"

"Well sir?"

"The domestics will have their orders," said Captain Paton, saving himself in mystery, and departed.

With a sudden relaxation and softening of every limb and feature, George turned and held out his arms. Hester crept into them; for a time nothing was heard but her long-drawn sobs. At last, half choked with the tears which yet were a relief:

"Only ten minutes!" she exclaimed; "ten little minutes to say good-bye for ever. If he had only said for ten years, twenty, forty! But for ever! You who

have been mine, and I who have been yours, never, after these ten minutes, to be anything to one another any more, as long as we both shall live. And we mustn't die—that would be wicked, too. Never in all our lives to meet again, except it may be as strangers. George, how can it be?"

"I think the speculation is useless for both of us," said George, with a certain grimness under his outward gentleness; "useless, and a little dishonouring. Come, Hester, I have had a great deal to bear just now. I tried to bear it well, for your sake, but I think I cannot endure much longer. Let us not waste these few last minutes in idle speculation, or unreasoning grief. Remember they *are* the last, maybe for months; let us use them to strengthen one another."

But she answered only with her tears.

"Sweetheart, where is your courage? Remember what I said to you in the garden, just now. Have you left off loving me?"

"No, oh! no."

"Do you think then, maybe, that I have left off loving you? No? Then really I cannot see in what way the situation is seriously changed for the worse. We always knew that, for a time, we must part."

"Oh! George, but then we were engaged."

There was a touch of rebuke, of reproach in her voice, but it was slight beside the change in his.

"Indeed! and what are we now?"

"I—don't—know."

"You don't know! Hester, if you value our happiness, don't trifle with me now. I tell you I shall not be able to bear it.

Are we not still plighted husband and wife?"

"Papa said not."

"And you intend to abide by that decision?"

"George, dear George, I daren't, I couldn't disobey papa."

They had moved apart now; apart body and soul.

"Oh!" she went on, as he stood mute before her, gazing as at a thing incredible; "give it up! You heard what papa says; he thinks you are making a mistake."

"He was good enough to express an opinion to that effect."

"Well, don't you think the opinion of a good and clever man ought to have some weight with you? You know it is so much easier for an outsider to judge, very often, in such cases; we can't always help our prejudices, and they blind us."

"Hester Paton! do you know of what you are accusing me? But no; you do not understand your own indictment. I am a fool. Hester, have I ever lied to you, that you should doubt me now?"

"Never, never; and oh! I don't doubt you," she said, breaking down afresh, at once under his tenderness and his wrath. "I didn't mean—that is, I meant—oh! I wanted to keep you, George, and there is no other way."

"If, then, I persevere in my present intention, you, who have pledged yourself mine, will renounce me unconditionally and for ever. Is that your meaning?"

"You are cruel. But yes, then; yes. I must obey papa. He has a right to command it."

"A right! And I, then—have I no rights? Is a promise of marriage a thing to be consummated or thrown aside at the

mere arbitrary will of a third person? Hester, you will drive me mad. Not an hour ago you were sending me on my way with a blessing; and now!"

"Papa——"

"Oh! never think to excuse the perjury so! Against your name it will stand recorded—a blot as black as though none other stood to the same treason on another's account."

"Hush! dear. You are not thinking."

"Am I not? It would not be a bad thing; such thoughts as you are giving me are not good. But it is you," he went on with a sudden change of tone, "it is you who are not thinking. Hester, the moments are going; before it is too late, do *you* think. Beware how you shatter the trust in a pure and religious woman's love, which you first inspired; more than you know may go with it. Give me hope,

at least. That word 'irrevocable' was never made for lips which have spoken to me as yours have spoken."

"I would if I could, indeed, indeed I would; but where would be the use? If you think, dear, you will see. It is all miserable enough, but to give such a promise might only make things worse; lead to fresh trouble. Because—how can I tell? Some day (oh! but I hope I shall die first) some day, papa might make arrangements—for me—which—which——"

Then George broke into a terrible laugh. He laughed long and loud, while she stood and trembled. The door opened; Hester fled weeping to her father's arms.

"Oh! papa, speak to him! I think I have sent him mad."

"Mad! No, sir, don't fear that. The cool and admirable sense of your most

dutiful daughter would surely be a corrective to the suggestions of a distempered mind. Do you know what she has just told me?"

"Told you to go about your business, I hope," roared the Captain. But he was frightened.

"Just so; and, as you came in, she was pointing out to me the imprudence of persisting in our engagement, on the grounds of future complications, of a matrimonial nature, in which her sense of duty to your wishes might be seriously hampered by—Oh, Heaven!"

"Leave the room; leave the house, sir!"

"I am going. But you shall hear me first, both of you. You, Captain Paton, whose patronage, little short of insulting as it has often been, I have endured with Heaven knows how true a humility. Yes!

before *you* I have felt humble, as before her I have felt unworthy,—more unworthy, a hundred times, even than she has proved herself to be of love such as mine has been."

"Oh, to speak so! Could he have ever loved me?" moaned Hester.

"What! When I have wrought myself up to a sacrifice which nothing but the principles you profess most to revere could have brought me to, you excommunicate me? I look for blessing, and meet nothing but a curse. Well, let it work; do not fear but it will! Do not misunderstand me. I am not appealing to your mercy. I will not repeat the hackneyed taunt, with which every pitiful coward flings the blame of his ruin on the woman who has cast him off. If, cut off at once from love and hope, my life henceforward should be such as you would scarcely care

to hear, on me be the blame. I accept it, as I spurn all plea of extenuating circumstance. But do not hold yourself guiltless; no, neither of you. For the acts of the future, I am answerable. For the influence of the past and present on that future, you cannot escape responsibility."

"Come, my child; since he will not relieve us of his company, we will rid ourselves of it—come!"

"Stay!" thundered George; and they stayed. For there had come upon him one of his rare hours of transporting passion, and in that state there was a suggestion of positive danger in disobedience. "Stay and hear me out. If, indeed, love that has been, at any time we meet again, you need not fear that any word, any look of mine, will speak reproach. Fear less even than this; our paths can

cross no more, here or hereafter. Of course you know that. 'A ministering angel will you be when I lie howling.' That's a sentiment out of a wicked play, Miss Paton, but there's truth in it, isn't there?"

"George! Oh, father, this must be madness!"

"Well, when that time comes, waste no pity on me, Hester Paton. Once you so sweetly pitied a sinner that the poor wretch mistook your pity for love. Whatever you hear, then, whatever some day you may see, never dare to pity me again."

"Will you go, sir?"

"I am going. Good-bye, Hester; good-bye for ever. How easily it is said, how easily done, after all; and only a few minutes ago we were wondering, were we not, how it could be? Oh! sweetest piece

of saintliness that ever was forsworn, ought I to curse or bless you? For now, at least, I can go without regrets."

The door closed upon the words with a heavy echoless crash, which seemed to gather up into one dull sound the whole finality of the situation.

Hester, shivering from head to foot, as she lay in her father's arms, lifted to him a white terror-distraught face.

"Is he gone?" she whispered in a thin weak voice. "Will he never come back any more?"

CHAPTER VI.

IN HARNESS.

"THERE *is* no place like home, after all, is there, George?"

Home was a dingy room in a very upper story, furnished certainly without any sinful luxury. The walls of home had at one time been papered in royal blue, with a fine bold pattern in chocolate and white disposed about it; the colours stood out vividly in unexpected places, like the Bloody Hand in the tapestry of the Haunted House. The windows of home, opened wide to catch any possible coolness of the dying August day, looked

on to a narrow winding street of warehouses and small lodgings ; and the evening breeze was laden with the scent of oranges and fish, underlying yet interpenetrating which was still another odour, peculiar, suggestive. Compounded of tar, vegetable refuse, and stale sea-water, it was a kind of parody of the genuine breath of ocean, and yet enough akin to it to flutter the wings of the sea-faring spirit in any breast where that spirit might chance to dwell. For it was the smell of the docks, and, by stretching very far out of that upper window at a proper angle, one might at times catch a glimpse of slowly passing masts, instinct at once with the life of the forest and the foam.

But the spirit of his fathers had not, in this matter, descended upon George, and the slight maritime flavour of the neighbourhood added nothing to its attractions

in his eyes. Rather, it would add nothing at some future time when external circumstances should once more begin to affect him. At present, all such things were powerless to move him even to annoyance. A great bitterness had taken possession of all his soul, producing a sort of recklessness, sometimes jovial, more often gloomy and apathetic.

This must, it is true, be taken with considerable reservation. All the ominous forecastings of his future career which he had flashed before Hester and her father notwithstanding, there had been little enough sensational in his proceedings since they parted. In fact, there were moments when he secretly wondered at himself for his moderation and propriety. George had not, indeed, the capacity for consistent and thorough-going disreputability. It was as impossible to him as

respectability seems to be to some men. No greater mistake could have been made than to count on any abiding effect of passion on his character or conduct. With him passion was no volcanic upheaval, modifying permanently the features of the soil. At most, it was like a meteor traversing the unshuddering heavens; the transit might be longer or shorter, the fiery after-trail more or less persistent, but its disappearance was a mere question of time, of any persistent after effects there was no question at all. For the present, however, to his own consciousness at least, the effects of his wrath and disappointment lingered still; and no doubt, though he exaggerated the importance of the outward signs of deterioration, he did suffer in character at this period.

In one thing only he seemed rather to have improved. His mother was more

to him than she had ever been in his life. He was full of gratitude, even of veneration, for her great constancy. He felt he had never valued as he ought this unalterable affection which neither time, absence, nor indifference had power to shake. Her tactless condolence would have maddened him from any one else, but from his mother in these days he asked not logic, not unbiassed judgment; he wanted just the assurance of unreasoning tenderness. For the present, his sense of justice was altogether in abeyance; the judicial minded, severely exact George Paton could feel consoled, in spite of himself, by much the same style of consolation as satisfies the child whose mother beats the naughty table against which it has knocked its head. This mood, too, of course, was transient; but for so long as it lasted none could have ministered to it so soothingly as she.

"No place like home," repeated Mrs. Paton.

George gazed at the scene with vacant criticism, unconscious of itself; but, before he could give in his adhesion to the sentiment, the clock of St. Nicholas church at the corner clanged out six. The sound changed the current of his thoughts, and, for a first result, seemed to give definiteness to his wandering gaze. He looked at the table, and his face darkened. The table was spread, not appetizingly, for tea, on a drab-coloured table-cloth, with stale bread, dubious looking butter dissolving into oil, and a plate of winkles by way of a great treat.

It was not enticing, but he had just got through his share of the feast with great indifference; in fact, without at all knowing what he ate.

"What a pity your father couldn't

manage to be in to tea. Where did he say he was going to-night?" said Mrs. Paton. She spoke insinuatingly, but George was uncompromising.

"I didn't hear him say he was going anywhere. He distinctly promised me that he would be in, but of course that doesn't go for much. Now I shall have to go and look him up. Let me take you across to the theatre at once, then you can take your time about dressing, and you know you must not hurry."

She certainly did not look like hurrying when he came back with her bonnet and shawl. She lay back in her chair, as comfortably as it would allow, and showed little inclination to move. Perhaps it was the languor of the hot weather, for she was not looking ill, but it seemed to disquiet George.

"I wish you needn't go to that wretched place to-night. But this shall

be the very last engagement you accept. Now they have taken me on we shall be able to manage quite well, without your sacrificing yourself."

"Oh! it's no sacrifice to me. You can't understand that or believe it, of course; I know you hate it, you best of sons. But I'm different."

"You can't like it."

"Well, not to say that I couldn't get along without it. But it is as natural as living, by this time. No doubt, though, of the two, it is the easier habit to get out of," she said, laughing comfortably. Then she raised herself in her chair, and let him put a light shawl round her shoulders. It was rather for the sake of respectability than of warmth; her wardrobe was at a very low ebb, and George had not yet been able to replenish it. His ready money had mostly gone in

appeasing creditors who became clamorous with the first dawn of hope.

"Remember, you have got to dress too," she said, tying her bonnet-strings with deliberation. "Don't stop too long looking after your father. I expect, for that matter, he is with Watkins; if so, he will be sure to turn up in time."

"In time, perhaps; but in condition?"

"Oh! I don't know. But, so long as he can remember the words, a little—a little jollity won't be out of character for the grave-digger. And if the worst comes to the worst, you will have to take it for him. Rosencrantz isn't wanted for the churchyard scene; the dressing will be a scramble, but it is so important we should keep in old Wellings' good graces. Oh! George, can you see now, what the worry of it has been to me all these months? to me who could do nothing."

"Never mind, mother; it is over now."

"Yes, all over. Oh dear! I feel so lazy to-night. No, not ill at all; only I have a sort of disinclination to go into the theatre. I wish you were going to be Hamlet. You would be quieter than that dreadful Jeffries. It makes me tired only to think of his voice; one might as well act with a fog-horn. You never yell, at any rate; nor you wouldn't grip my wrist fit to pinch it off, nor come down upon my knees like a hundred of bricks, like he does in the bedroom scene. Just try."

He knelt down beside her and laid his head upon her knees. There was certainly not much passion in the movement, but it was not without a sort of pathos. His mother sat still, stroking his hair; there was a dilatoriness about them both this evening, he seemed as little disposed to start as she did. But presently he said—

"We must be going, mother, indeed," and rose and offered her his arm.

"I suppose we must. Bother take it all! Acting in general and Hamlet in particular."

To which George fervently assented, and they went out. The theatre was but two streets off; when he had left her there, he went to look for his father. Not finding him in the precincts of the theatre, he went out again into the street. He had not been a fortnight in Bristol without learning to know William Paton's haunts accurately enough; so he did not waste much time in speculative researches. To-day, however, as he turned into a little street near the docks, in one of whose numerous public-houses he had reason to expect to find his missing parent, he met him, accompanied by the jovial mentor to whom Mrs. Paton had trusted to bring

him back. George had only to retrace his steps in their company. He was relieved to find that there would be no need, this time, to throw himself into the gap as a substitute. Both the future grave-diggers were even more than professionally cheerful, but there was nothing in the condition of either to warrant interference; as for remonstrance, George had learned not to throw valuable eloquence away.

They were a sufficiently ill-matched trio as they walked on together; or rather George exemplified the awkward position of the third who is no company. The other two, indeed, who had attained a state of universal benevolence, were willing enough to have included him in the immense brotherhood of their genial souls; but George did not rise to the occasion. He walked a little apart, erect, handsome and uncompromising; his dress as aggres-

sive a protest as his manner against that Bohemianism in which he had failed in his own despite. From time to time he let his eyes rest for a moment on his companions, and not even in the days of his respectability could they have so rested with less favour. It is true that a much less particular son might have found it hard to look with much satisfaction on William Paton now. When the father and son had parted six months before, though the process of deterioration had been going on for many years, it had advanced at a reasonable rate, and, having it always before him, George had noticed it the less.

But now there was scarcely a trace of respectability left. In gait, dress, manner, he seemed in reality the broken-down, yet irrepressible, vagabond that he had personated on that visit to Captain Paton ten years ago.

Yet he still retained his old powers, only he was now so little to be trusted to keep himself in a state to exercise them that no manager, however appreciative, would trust him with any but such subordinate parts as could be filled up with tolerable ease at a moment's notice. He took his deposition coolly; would now and then flash some minor character into sudden and unexpected significance, but more often was content to scramble through anyhow. But the life of the stage and green-room he would never give up; if it had become a second nature to Mrs. Paton, it was an actual necessity of life to him.

When they all met again, ready for the performance, George could not deny that, in one respect at least, his father had not lost his old cunning. In former times William Paton had been noted for the

excellence of his make-ups. Now, looking round on the motley crowd, George could not but perceive that, in his case alone, art had been informed by genius. George, who had got through his dressing mechanically, with his thoughts many miles away, and who had seen, with bitter satisfaction, Hester's shocked face in the glass rather than his own—her soft eyes, phantom eyes which never had looked, never could look on such a scene, widening with horror at every stroke and tint he laid on—had little idea of the effectiveness of his own appearance, even in the shabby and tawdry dress, which was all the present company could provide. Personal vanity was not one of his failings, at any time; least of all was it likely to trouble him now. If anything could have increased his distaste for his resumed profession it would have been the choice of this particular play. With-

out being poetical, he had enough literary feeling to know that his associates had none; their cheerful complacency over a task infinitely beyond their strength moved him to contemptuous indignation.

Mrs. Paton seemed to have revived, now that she was actually in her war-paint; her spirits might have been screwed up with the violins, whose tuning was already screeching through the building, so suddenly and vigorously had they begun to mount. One or two anxious looks from George, who feared the after effects of this excitement, passed quite unnoticed, and he was too glad to see her so like her old self to have the heart to check her.

His anxious attention was given rather to his father, of whose equally delightful spirits he had more reason to distrust the source. Moreover, he strongly suspected

the existence of a reserve fund of happiness in the property flask, which the grave-digger wore at his side. Such observations as he could make had to be made very surreptitiously, so as not to excite the notice or suspicions of the manager, who had one of those tempers which ensure an almost obsequious observance from peaceful natures, yet with which even peaceful natures cannot always avoid encounters.

William Paton seemed to discern the situation, and after a humorously malicious fashion of his own, to enjoy it. He put himself ostentatiously under the protection of the manager's presence, against any possible remonstrance. The disreputable of the company he had on his side; the respectable, and the average, he knew would maintain a strict neutrality, more or less frigid according to the degree of respectability. For George had alienated these

last by a certain stand-off manner which, noticeable at all times, increased when the result of suppressed temper, and just now his temper was in a chronic state of irritability. George saw how matters stood, and his helplessness added something to his annoyance, already sufficiently acute. He would have liked to quarrel with some one, no matter who; but he dared not trust himself to the relief, for he felt on the verge of one of his outbreaks of passion. He would have been glad of a part in which he might have had the chance of tearing passion to tatters. But nothing in that line could be done with the irreproachable Rosencrantz.

The piece began; dragging through its weary length in uninteresting mediocrity, scarcely bad enough to be funny, as a rule. There were so few supers that every well-dressed character had to go on the stage

whenever the court appeared, so that George was more often on duty than his part really demanded. When they came off, the first time, he did contrive to get a word with his father; but he gained nothing beyond a burst of optimism. There was a poetical eloquence about his language which, taken in connection with its want of bearing on the subject in hand, moved George to real alarm. He was seriously thinking of making a forcible seizure of the fatal flask when the manager came along, in a black fury, swearing at the carpenter. It appeared something had gone wrong with the sliding groove for the ghost, which had so much detracted from the impressiveness of his appearance that Olympus was still shaking with the mirth of the gods.

George hastily dragged his father out of the manager's sight. For though there

was no doubt as to Paton's condition, the young man did not think it was serious enough to endanger the success of the part, and wished, above all things, to avoid the scene which an attempt to deprive him of it must have caused,—a scene pretty certain to end in summary dismissal. But in escaping one danger he fell into another. William Paton at once entrenched himself within a circle of his cronies, and the chance was gone. At his next interval he found, to his dismay, that his father had vanished altogether. After all, when the churchyard scene did come on, he was too much occupied in attending to his mother to realize that the anxious moment had arrived. Mrs. Paton, exhausted by the dreaded bed-chamber scene, though still in good spirits, looked fagged beyond anything that the few minutes interval could restore. As George was trying in vain to find a

quiet corner for her, a sudden roar of applause and laughter shook the boards beneath them. Mrs. Paton stopped her feeble advance.

"Listen!" she said, in a proud weak voice, "that's for your father."

An irresistible impulse seized George to see what was going on. Leaving his mother on a stage sofa, from which he swept a heap of miscellaneous properties, with a strict injunction to keep perfectly still, he hurried to the wings.

The delight of the pit and gallery explained itself. Undoubtedly William Paton was acting with much spirit. There was about him, in fact, that genuine touch of nature which they could not fail to recognize. George listened and watched, in a tension of anxiety. The words, though not unhesitatingly delivered, appeared to be correct; happily so, for his fellow actor,

for his part, was in no condition to have put things right. He was, perhaps, sufficiently master of himself to have a right to indignation at any disparaging suggestion to the contrary. But if he was sober enough for one, he certainly was not sober enough for two, and any swerving from the path of tradition in word or deed would probably throw him off the track altogether. It was for some such brilliant innovation that George watched in terrible suspense; but it did not come, and he began to breathe more freely. He saw Hamlet, on the opposite side, giving the last touch to his cloak before entering; when he was on they would be comparatively safe. Hamlet came on, and delivered his first speeches to Horatio without incident. Then he turned to inspect the skulls, putting his first question to the grave-digger. Paton, who had been sitting on

his barrow, started suddenly to his feet. Perhaps, delivered from the necessity of speech and action, drowsiness had been coming over him, and he was still barely awake. At any rate, with a vacant stare, he plunged forward, caught his foot in a spade on the ground, staggered a moment, and then fell, head foremost, into the open grave.

The yell of delight which ensued was long and loud. In vain Hamlet, pale with passion through his paint, strove gallantly to ignore the situation. Every time he opened his lips, he was met by volleys of chaff, cheers, and cat-calls. Evidently the only thing to be done was to send on the funeral procession at once; a spectacle might distract the attention of the audience. George rushed towards the place where he had left his mother, hoping to spare her agitation and as much hurry as might be;

but he was too late. He met her coming along in a sort of bewildered scud, goaded on, as it were, by the manager, like Io and the gad-fly, supposing Io to have been an elderly Alderney. The rest of the procession had been already collected after a fashion, and were intoning a dirge at the top of their voices; the sound of singing behind the scenes had already taken effect, there was a sensible decrease of noise. An impression had been made, it remained to follow it up, but the Queen was behind-hand. Even as George came up to take her hand, Wellings pushed her into place; pushed her so roughly that she stumbled over her robe, and all but fell. George turned without a word, and struck out with all his might; but Wellings saw in time to dodge the blow, and before anything more could happen, Mrs. Paton had seized her son's arm, and was

dragging him on with all her little strength.

The rest, to George, was mere confusion, till the scene closed; but the confusion was in his own mind, in reality the entrance of the procession had had the desired effect, and the scene ended fairly peaceably. As they came off, Wellings' voice was heard, in the breathless hurried undertone which was the highest expression of his fury. He was speaking to Paton, who had made his way out, a little earlier, from the space beneath the stage, and now stood leaning up against the wall, evidently past comprehension, a fatuous smile on his painted face, his dress soiled with dust and cobwebs, his eyes, whence speculation was fading fast, fixed mechanically on the manager. As George came up, Wellings turned furiously upon him.

A quarter of an hour later the members

of the court were being collected for the last scene. Once more the Queen was missing. In the confusion of the interview with Wellings, George had not seen what had become of her, and in the tumult of ill-repressed passion in which it had left him, he had not observed her absence. Now, pushing back an officious call-boy, he ran quickly to her dressing-room.

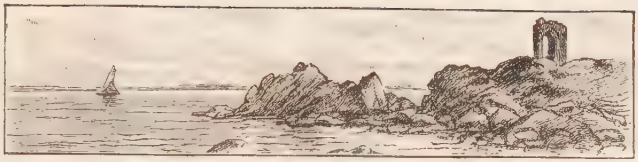
His heart was at once heavy and angry; but the impatience of old days, which would have sent him into the room with the mere form of a preparatory knock and a stern word, was over for ever. He knocked clearly and gently; he waited, but no voice or movement answered the summons. He knocked again; and again the silence was unbroken. Then he gently opened the door. Two guttering candles burned upon the table, and by their light he saw her.

She was sitting in a chair, in her robes, her head a little fallen to one side. Her crown had slipped partly off, but was kept hanging by the veil attached. One hand lay in her lap; the listless fingers of the other, drooping limply at her side, still just touched the tip of the paste-board sceptre which had slid from their grasp.

George went in, crept up, nearer, nearer, softly, not to wake her—oh! with such agonized softness, that he might prove to his shuddering heart that she need not wake. Nearer and nearer, and then there came one of those cries which the crier marvels should not wake his dead.

Quite quietly, without fear or pain, Theresa Paton had died, as she once wished to die, in harness. Her son knelt beside her, among heaps and litter of tinsel and tawdriness, himself tricked out in

finery as tawdry, and her husband lay huddled together among piles of dusty scenery in a drunken sleep. From the theatre came sounds of stamping and shouts. The audience were getting impatient.



CHAPTER VII.

BILLING AND COOING.

A BRIEF paragraph in a local paper, headed "Death in a Theatre," was all whereby Mrs. William Paton's friends or relations could have learned her fate. With a certain fierce desire to lose, and be lost by, all those who had so lately made his world, his life, George would not even put her name among the obituary notices of that same local paper, lest, by any improbable chance, it might get copied into some journal more likely to come under the eyes at Clapham.

But indeed, if George himself had been

dead and buried, he could not have passed more completely into the land of silence, so far as Captain Paton's household was concerned. Not so much. Death would have left behind it some kindly words, some interchange of gentle memories, with a smile for the sweetness that had been, and a tear because it should never be again. This was the silence that enwraps the living dead; the silence of utter repudiation, the last refuge of shame.

For Hester was learning to be ashamed. They were teaching her to look on the memory of her engagement, as on the memory of an innocent disgrace. In her mother's nervous tenderness and half apologetic manner, in her father's truly Roman attitude, she read the same story. Yet her heart, so much of it as was not gone into keeping with her conscience, told her such a different tale. And even her conscience

would make uneasy efforts towards liberty. Hester was shocked and startled, now and then, to find how near she had come to exercising private judgment on the question of George's conduct. It was really against her will. She had one of those dispositions which go far to justify, by fairly necessitating, tyranny. Without a despot she would have been a miserable being, helpless as a cage-born bird which a cruel kindness had set free upon the boundless plain. There are natures which come into the world in cages; natures to whom the idea of independence brings the same sort of shuddering, shrinking, naked feeling that the old heathen pities in the soul as it flutters reluctant from the body.

Yet Hester had one beside her who would have justified, and upheld her, in any rebellion, could she have found it even in her imagination to rebel. Anne drew

no silence about the tabooed name. In private she used it freely; it was now her rallying-cry, now her reproach, when, either by love or shame, she would fain have stirred up Hester to strike at least one blow for her rights.

It was useless, of course, so far as Hester was concerned; but it had a certain effect upon herself. She was not a girl in whom pity would ever be akin to love; it was much more likely to be akin to contempt. She saw Hester's pale cheeks, and bright eyes washed in tears; saw her going like a ghost—as orthodox in her grief as she was in her obedience—and felt chiefly impatient. From Hester herself, whose dignity never insisted upon reticence, she had learned enough of the story of that last interview to put George in an unexpected light. She began to think more and better of him than she had

ever done before; her sympathies were very easily enlisted on the side of revolt. She pictured him, sometimes, in his new life; and pictured him wrongly, of course. Embittered, but liberated, she thought of him as hurling a stern defiance at conventionality in every act and word; and she did not suffer any unworthy envy of his opportunities to detract from her sense of his picturesqueness. She recognized, with a secret sigh, that the glories of freedom would never be for her. But she was generous, and would gladly have given him, once, the right hand of a fellowship which had so long lain unsuspected. On the left, symbol of a bound which only in spirit could she pass, glittered the gems of her engagement ring.

The time when that symbol was to be exchanged for one yet more binding was fast approaching, and it was no halcyon

weather which had brought the betrothed so far. The barometer, for those two, had long been set at stormy. The presentiment which had come to Anne, on the first day of Henry's new dignity, was amply fulfilled. The joy of dominion was on him, he revelled in the exercise of authority. In an evil hour for both of them, it struck him that he would like to form his future wife. He had his ideal, and he would mould her to it. So thought, so done; or rather, so attempted. If it be true that nothing seems small to a really great mind, then Henry's mind must have been really great. He luxuriated in detail. Nothing escaped him. Anne's language, manners, tastes, opinions; the songs she sang; the books she read (or more truly did not read, for even fiction had no power to attract her to literature); the accomplishments she had, and those she had not; the very colour of

her gowns and the way she wore her hair, all came in for criticism and suggestion. Sometimes he was in the right, sometimes he was merely vexatious; but, right or wrong, he always managed to be aggravating.

Anne began to fret. Not permanently; but every separate outburst of irritation left a residue of annoyance, not actively present to her consciousness, but there, as a balance in hand, to swell the sum of the next offence. Then Mrs. Stephens descended into the arena, encouraged thereto by the sight of Henry's victories. Anne routed her with ease, as usual. She retired, feeling she had mistaken her enemy, and with a respectful sense that Henry owed more to his own skill, less to Anne's weakness, than she had believed. From that time she employed strategy, not without success. Under her inspira-

tion Henry grew more exacting, more superior, always, of course, in a gentlemanly way. Perhaps, if you are to live under a tyranny, it is well that it should be an elegant, a polished one. Anne could not certainly have wished that her husband should swear at her, or beat her. Yet it is possible that she would have found herself better prepared to meet even those gross contingencies with success, than this calm, unassailable politeness which was not even sarcastic, failing as little in all the etiquette of affection as it did in the etiquette of war.

Anne thoroughly recognized this, and resented it. Whether or no she might prove, at bottom, to be one of those women who, in their secret souls, love a man the better after he has thoroughly beaten them, this much is certain, that Henry was not the man to conduct the operation

with success. Anne was by nature passionate, though circumstances had not developed her in that direction ; the victor whom she might admire would conquer by the force of a yet fiercer passion, as fire drives back fire. Henry had conquered by virtue of cold water.

"It is all because he can keep his horrid temper, and I can't," she admitted, with helpless rebellion; and she felt he had taken a mean advantage of her.

Indeed, till she should have attained to the true Vere de Vere repose, she could have no chance. And Anne was not of the race of Vere de Vere. All that external polish could do for her had been done from her cradle upwards, and, aided by a certain natural adaptability, with success. But her deepest nature,—that self which was the only inheritance bequeathed her by her ancestors,—remained

untouched. And a mysterious inheritance it was. That complicated, unrecorded genealogy of ancient mariners must have transmitted to Anne many curious strains, —gipsy, southern, savage perhaps, who knows?—mingled with the fundamental Viking blood.

Mrs. Paton began to get nervous. She did all in her power to keep the peace. In a feeble, bewildered fashion she even tried to restrain Captain Paton from exhortation. It was in vain; every fresh dispute he made the occasion of a homily, on that portion of the marriage vow which concerns obedience.

If Henry had been much at Clapham during that summer, there might really have been an explosion. Fortunately, he had been constantly going down to Ridgelands, spending a week or ten days at a time there, then coming back for a night

or two, and once more returning. Moreover, as soon as the house had been made fairly habitable, Mrs. Stephens too had gone up, with the twins, to keep house for him till the wedding. And now, in the latter end of August, Mrs. Paton was to bring Anne for a visit. The visit was really a concession to Mrs. Paton, whose anxiety to see Lady Stephens' future home and surroundings, dear Maria thought it imprudent to thwart any longer.

The visit was to last a week or ten days; no more time could be allowed for it, so near the month which would be amply filled by the last preparations for the wedding. Anne and her mother alone went, Hester very naturally shrinking from it. Anne went without prejudices, and was honestly pleased. At the first meeting, Mrs. Stephens was on her best behaviour; so was the bride-elect. They

had not met for some time, and the first start was always ostentatiously friendly. Then she was pleased with the place. She had never lived long enough in the country to know how much she would dislike it; and even her uncultivated taste could appreciate the beauty of the scenery, to a certain extent. She began to enjoy the prospect of her position; to think that soon she should be mistress here went far to reconcile her to a marriage which she had never, in fact, regarded with any worse feeling than indifference. For the first few hours of her stay, she was able to forget how little room there would be for a mistress, in any place where Henry Stephens was master.

As she stood admiringly at one of the windows of her pleasant room—a long, low room, looking across the park—the twins came in to give her their own par-

ticular welcome. A sort of liking had grown up between Anne and these girls. She knew how highly imaginany was the character they enjoyed among their family and acquaintances, and favoured them with a half patronizing recognition of spiritual kinship. As for the twins, they secretly adored her, with passionate admiration. Her beauty and her audacity, combined, had taken their timid but aspiring hearts by storm. Above all, they honoured her for her independence of Henry. It must be owned, that he had not been very successful in winning the hearts of the younger members of his family.

"Well, my dears," said Anne, dropping into a coil on the window-sill, "how do you like ruralizing by now?"

"It isn't much different to Clapham," said Susan. "It is prettier, of course,

and there is more room; but it hasn't made much difference to us."

"We are expected to be simple country maidens here," continued Sarah. "That's not simpler than the other kind, but I think it is even a greater nuisance. I believe Henry would like to have us running in about once an hour, clapping our hands because we have found the first violet, or heard the bleat of a new-born lamb, or something of the sort."

"We have to go and feed the chickens, and look for the eggs; there's a little basket, with blue ribbons on the handle, we must bring them in."

"We ought always to have our hands full of wild-flowers. And he likes visitors to catch us swinging in the orchard, in white frocks, with our arms round one another's waists. I know he does, though he can't quite dare to tell us that in so

many words. But we hate swinging; it makes us giddy."

"Oh! is there a swing? How jolly! Won't I please him in that!"

But the twins slowly shook their heads.

"That is only our style; it isn't what he will expect of you, the lady of the manor. Gentle dignity, and all that sort of thing. You had better model yourself on Hester."

"Oh, Hester!" exclaimed Anne. "I might model *in* wax, perhaps; I can't model from it. But you are right," she went on after a pause. "How silly, oh, how silly, Henry has been!"

She spoke with a sort of impatience; then she jumped up from the window-sill.

"Come, girls, I'm going to my lord," she said, rather to the relief of the twins, who scarcely knew how to take her last utterance.

By that time next day, only two persons had any illusions left as to the ticklish nature of the situation. Mrs. Paton saw nothing but Cupids and turtle-doves, in a rosy cloud. Henry saw a superior being, forming and guiding one elect soul. The result could not admit of doubt; he could afford to exercise the patience of perfect security. But every one else knew that, during the next few days, Anne would be crossing that hair's-breadth bridge of sword edge, on the other side of which is paradise but, beneath it, destruction irremediable.

Anne knew it too, no one better. It did not make her nervous, because she cared so very little whether she got across or not. In fact, the paradise to which she must pass had few attractions for her, fewer every day. At this time, if Henry would have thrown her over, she would have sincerely rejoiced; but she lacked

resolution, and was still far enough from despair, to deliberately break off the engagement herself. Besides, she knew that was what Mrs. Stephens wanted. Perversity supplied a kind of motive for perseverance, and, though often tempted to the fatal plunge, Anne for a while held on.

But it was very hard; harder every day. Sir Henry! "Oh, the little more and how much it is!" Only three little letters, and from being ridiculous he was becoming intolerable.

Mrs. Stephens laid traps for her. She fell into each, was lifted out, sighed and smiled over, and forgiven. Anne resented his forgiveness; she writhed more under his kiss than under his mother's thin and sniffing smiles.

Visits were paid and returned. Anne took to the wrong people, would not

look at the young ladies who would be such nice friends for her, snubbed sweetly the patronizing matrons, and taught the young idea how to flirt. In a week, all the fatuous, and rather bucolic youth of the neighbourhood were at her feet. They danced to her piping, and she laughed like a cobold at their clumsiness. Henry shook his head, smiled on, and kissed her. Clearly, jealousy would not force him to a rupture. To be jealous, you must at least believe in the possibility of an unfavourable comparison; Henry had not this belief.

One day they went out riding together; and even Mrs. Stephens could not refrain from admiration, as she watched them start. Anne looked infinitely lovely in her dark green habit, her hair bound tight, like coils of sunshine, round her pretty head. When she came back, in two hours'

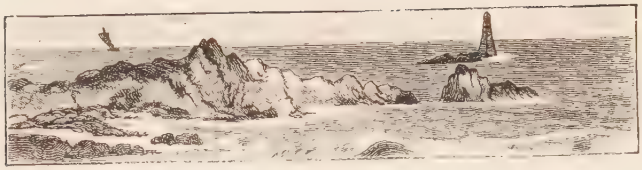
time, she was, perhaps, even more lovely, but certainly less correct. The rebellious sunshine had broken loose, and fell about her beautiful flushed face, and her hat bore signs of rough usage. She returned alone, flung her reins to the groom, and asked indifferently whether Henry had come home? It appeared that, in a certain field, they had come to a gate. It was rather stiff and, while Henry was struggling with it, a spirit of evil came upon Anne; a perfect whirlwind of impatience. She put her horse at the hedge, rose, flashed, descended; Henry caught the wave of a light adieu from a little gauntleted hand, and that was the last he saw of her for that ride. Anne protested that the horse, once excited by the leap, had escaped from her control; that she had been fairly run away with across country. But perhaps she did not greatly

care to be convincing; at any rate, she failed to convince. Mrs. Stephens was of opinion that a young lady, who could take hedges in such a very workmanlike style, need not have found much difficulty in checking that *particularly* steady and quiet animal. Poor thing! He must indeed have been *worked upon*, to contrive the jump at all.

Anne retorted, as she knew how; upon this scene, enter Henry, himself naturally not in the best of tempers. His temper ran to lecturing—a public lecturing; Mrs. Stephens' to scolding; Anne's to answering back, with a briskness and vigour which soon passed the limits of polite conversation, as that has been understood since the days of good Queen Anne. She was fast coming to the heroic directness, the force of epithet, which Dean Swift leads us to suppose was permissible

in polite conversation in his day, when Mrs. Paton made a diversion by a burst of tears. The diversion was effectual, and the unfortunate episode was allowed to sink into oblivion.

But it had the effect of rousing poor Mrs. Paton, from a dream of fancied security, to a state of pitiable nervousness.



CHAPTER VIII.

SIR HENRY.

The next morning Mrs. Paton spent on the sofa in her room, struggling with the situation, with a brain which even the cloud of a headache scarcely made less fit for diplomacy, than it had been left by nature. Anne spent it in a preliminary skirmish with Mrs. Stephens, after which she gave her too-attached twin followers the slip, and strolled off, by herself, to walk off her irritation in the grounds. It was a glowing August day, and Anne had no reason for going anywhere in particular, and little love for exercise for its own

sake, at any time. So, after all, it ended in a stroll through the plantation, towards the chaplain's house; a halt at the moss-covered foot of a great beech; and then—in a nap. Anne had the true vagabond gift of sleeping in the open air.

When she woke up, she felt much better in temper. She came back, through a flicker of shadow and sunshine, singing softly to herself. Henry was forgotten; she was alone, and free in the free air. From the plantation, a little iron gate led on to the lawn which sloped up from the front door. The gate was well screened from the house by evergreens; and as all the principal rooms looked the other way, a person might linger long there, without being observed from within. A person was there now; and, to all appearance, a very miserable one. Sitting on the top rail, her head bowed, her hat

hanging forlornly down her back, her scraggy wisps of lank, yellow hair all fallen forward over her eyes, into which her little red knuckles were despairingly pressed, was Elizabeth Jones. And she was sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Why, Bess," said Anne, gracefully, "what's up?"

Anne had already, in her short stay, made the acquaintance of the chaplain's children. There had not as yet resulted, or even dawned upon the horizon, much of that moral and social regeneration which Sir Henry had so hopefully predicted. But there is a free-masonry among outlaws born, by which they soon find each other out; and the little Jones's feelings for Anne were no less cordial on account of her connection with Henry. Rather, they were more sympathetic.

Elizabeth sprang down from her perch,

and fairly fell on her knees beside Anne, clasping her gown in her little grimy, tear-wet fingers.

"Oh, Miss Anne, help us, speak for us!" she sobbed. "You're going to marry him; surely he'll listen to you."

"What, in a scrape with Sir Henry again?" said Anne. "Oh, well, you needn't break your heart about that; we'll soon put that right!"

"Do you think so?" said the child despairingly. "Oh, if you could——"

"Why, you little silly, what is it? Not murder, I suppose?"

"No, not *that*," said Elizabeth. Her tone implied that it was not far off. "It's —it's poaching!" she said.

Anne's hopelessly unaristocratic instincts broke out in a peal of laughter. The child stared at her, with something like awe. Born and bred on the manor, she had a

far more awful sense of the enormity of the crime than Anne had, or ever would have. That any one connected with the landed interest could laugh at such a subject as this, seemed to her little short of incredible.

"But, don't you know," she said, "we're to be sent away, all of us—papa too, and—and it will break papa's heart." She broke into fresh sobbing. "He isn't fit for anything else; he's got no spirit, poor papa," she said, with the curious candour with which Mr. Jones' children usually spoke of their parent. "Bob, and Harry, and all the rest of us, we shouldn't care—the further we're off from this horrid old place, the better pleased we shall be. But papa's different."

"But this is nonsense, you know," said Anne. "Sir Henry only wants to frighten you. (And a nasty, spiteful trick at that," she added mentally, with rising revolt.)

"No," said Elizabeth, "he means it. Papa and the boys are in there now, gone back to beg him—I'd never have let them do it, if it hadn't been for papa; no, I wouldn't. But I know it will be no use. Oh! Miss Anne, help us!"

"Come with me," said Anne, abruptly. Her colour had risen, and her blue eyes looked stormy.

"Oh! if Harry would only have listened to me about that letter," sobbed poor Elizabeth. "I don't believe any one will be able to help us, after that."

But she trotted obediently behind Anne, who, for her part, swept on, with a gait rarely seen in her but, for effect, not likely once seen to be forgotten. She made no inquiries, she scarcely paused to hear the permission to enter, she swept into the study like an empress, and stood confronting Sir Henry and the piteous group

before him, with one arm thrown across the shoulders of her draggled, woe-begone little client, feeling perfectly competent to hold her own, and Elizabeth's cause too, against all the world.

In less than ten minutes she was undeceived. In that time she had learned, as she had never learned before, the full, cold, resistless power of the obstinacy of the man to whom she was pledged; his absolute invulnerability; his implacability, impervious to every dart of conscience, behind its shield of high principle and justice.

After the first few words of passionate reproach, she sank, overpowered she knew not how, into pleading,—humble and yet more humble. Then she sank into silence. She stood, with wide eyes, holding by the back of the chair which he had risen to place for her, with his unfailing courtesy,

upon her entrance, and which she had refused to accept. She was almost glad, now, of its support.

In the good old days of persecution, there were to be found persons who had reduced this great means of suasion to a science. And some of these persons have left it on record that, supposing your end to be victory rather than extermination, it was a mistake to put women actually to the torture. It was found, by experience, that the nerves of the weaker sex were more successfully operated upon through the channel of their imaginations. If a picturesque and vivid description, from the model, of the effects of the pulley, the rack, or the screw, failed to convince, it was well to get hold of some other criminal, and make him serve as the illustration of an experimental lecture in torture. This had a wonderfully persuasive

power on the female spectator; the commoner, brutal method was not to be compared with this, as a convert-producing system.

If Henry had wished to thoroughly cow his future wife, he could have devised no better scene for her than this. She saw her passion, and her prayers, fall frozen and dead, before the quiet set lips, the cold grey eye, of that handsome Gorgon mask. She watched the trembling of Mr. Jones' weak, elderly hands upon his stick; marked the bowing of his grey head in deprecation, in entreaty, before the young man who sat there as judge, and scathed his victim with measured eloquence, and doomed him with passionless vindictiveness; she even marked a furtive tear that stole down the furrowed cheek—as Elizabeth had said, poor Mr. Jones really had no spirit. But what indeed would spirit have availed?

She beheld the other criminals,—boys little used to be bullied, little wanting in audacity,—utterly subdued; unable, even from the recklessness of despair, to gather a word to say. In the pitiless logic of their doomsman's reasoning, in the calm superiority of his manner, no loop-hole could be found, to admit a refutation on the one hand or an insult on the other. They were silenced; as completely, as overwhelmingly silenced, as though, indeed, their guilt admitted of as little extenuation as Sir Henry was disposed to allow it.

Anne was cowed. But the very excess of her terror drove her to revolt; like a wild animal brought to bay she prepared to fight; not from courage, but from sheer despair. When Henry's final charge was answered by a groan from Mr. Jones—a groan that was all but a sob,—she gave a sudden low cry, turned and fled.

Mrs. Paton, still on her sofa, had been too much absorbed to notice a certain confusion audible in the house. Steps, voices, the opening and shutting of doors; all ordinary sounds enough, yet somehow fraught with a mysterious suggestion of catastrophe. But, except as intensifying in throbs the pain of her headache, Mrs. Paton scarcely heard them. They had ceased for awhile, when all at once, preceded by the whirr of a door quivering as it fell back wide upon its hinges, and by the light bound and rush of flying feet, the door of her room was flung open and Anne stood before her.

"Mamma," she cried, "it is all over! Take me home."

Behind her, through the open door, a flood of midday glory, pouring through a window in the corridor, irradiated her, from the burnished splendour of her hair

to the point of the little sandalled foot on tiptoe with the desire to depart. With her white gown and golden hair, and the up-springing attitude of a devouring impatience, she looked like some pure spirit waiting to soar. But it was not at all in that light that she struck Mrs. Paton.

"What do you mean? For pity's sake, child, shut the door; you will be heard all over the house."

"It will be known all over the house directly, in any case. What does it matter whether it is a little sooner or a little later?" Nevertheless she obeyed—with a slam.

"What will be known? Good gracious, Anne, how you startle me!"

"That my engagement to Sir Henry Stephens is broken off. That never, as long as I live, will I have anything to say to him again."

Mrs. Paton rose slowly from the couch; she was beyond tears, her very headache was paralyzed into quiescence by the shock.

"Unhappy girl!" she began.

"Yes!" cried Anne; "I *was* an unhappy girl; oh! the misery, the misery, you were all preparing for me. But I saw it before it was too late. Don't say anything, mamma," she went on, as her mother seemed about to speak; but indeed Anne's eloquence, when once set going, was a thing to be of necessity submitted to. "It would not be the least bit of use. I tell you, if all the lords and ladies in the land, and all the bishops in their aprons, were to go down on their bended knees to me to take him again, I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do it, not to be made empress of the world. I wouldn't do it, if it was to save my life; they might cut me into little

bits, or tear me in pieces with wild horses, and if I could prevent it, Henry Stephens shouldn't even have the bits."

She paused, more from lack of breath than of words.

The vigour of this address rather reassured Mrs. Paton. She felt instinctively that this was not the language of passion, but she was mistaken in thinking that it was not on, that account, the language of resolution.

"Where is dear Henry?" she asked, and settled her cap. "I will go and make your peace."

"Don't; it will be perfectly useless. I want none of his forgiveness; I wouldn't have it if he offered it. Let him insult me with it; just let him try, that's all. Oh! I would ——"

A knock, quite unmistakable in character, came at the door. Anne broke off short;

Mrs. Paton breathed a silent but fervent thanksgiving. Sir Henry came in, breathing pardon and illimitable forbearance. When he saw Anne he betrayed a pleased surprise which, if it was not real, was an admirable imitation.

"So my ruffled dove has fled for shelter to her natural home," he began. "Perhaps I had better retire. There is no power for soothing like a mother's."

He made a movement as if to go, but Mrs. Paton fairly sprang up and caught him by the arm.

"Stay; oh! pray, dear Henry, stay. Explain what it is all about. I am afraid Anne has been very much to blame."

"Oh! not at all. Who would blame a little generous impulsiveness in a lady? It was her misfortune, not her fault, that the objects of her intercession were altogether unworthy."

"I can understand that you should think so!"

"My dear Anne, when it comes to poaching——"

"One rabbit knocked over with a pop-gun!"

"We need not discuss the exact degree of guilt in the abstract. I am sure, if you think, you will understand that, in this instance, it is the position of the offenders that makes the gravity of the offence. What, among an untaught peasantry, might be mere dishonesty, in the family of their pastor, who should be their guide, becomes something little short of—sacrilege."

If Henry had any misgivings as to the correctness of this criminal code, he did not suffer it to appear. He took that rather high jump gallantly, with a pause for impressiveness, not for hesitation.

"I wonder you don't prosecute," said

Anne, crushingly. But Henry was not crushed.

"My dear girl surely understands me better than that; such a suggestion never could come, in earnest, from those lips which but now pleaded, so sweetly, for a pardon I might not grant. No; far be it from me to extend the notoriety of the scandal. Cut it off, root it out, I must; but, so far as I can spare the feelings of the guilty, I will."

"That means turning them off, without notice and without character, as you might do to a housemaid, when the evidence was too weak to make out a case about the spoons!"

"Anne!" groaned Mrs. Paton; "where can you get the very idea of such low comparisons?"

"The illustration is a little homely; it is also a little inapt," said Henry, but with

an indulgent smile. "We expect ladies to be greater at rhetoric than logic, however. Dear Anne is only referring to the action it has been my painful duty to take towards Mr. Jones."

"What, at any rate, has he done?"

"In this world, dear one, you will find that, inscrutable as the decree may be, the innocent must often suffer with the guilty. Besides, your sense of justice, even though that be a woman's, must remind you that I offered to retain his services on the estate, if he would but undertake to send his misguided children to a boarding-school; an arrangement which, I still think, it would have been to their advantage to effect."

"And which you knew, when you made the suggestion, he could not afford to do."

Sir Henry gave Mrs. Paton a look, sighed and smiled, as who should say, "Where will unreason stop?"

"Though for that matter," he went on aloud, gracefully ignoring the interruption, "I might, if it were worth while, urge that here, if anywhere, that saying might apply: *Quod facit per alterum, facit per se.* Ladies do not understand Latin; it may be briefly explained, in this case, by saying that a father must be held largely responsible for the acts of his children, since it is to his training, or to the want of it, that such acts are ultimately due. Here, alas! it was the want of it that told."

"Finally, then, he must go?"

"He must; they must. Dear Anne, I am indeed sorry to have been obliged to refuse your first serious request—a request, too, which does such honour to my sweet girl's heart, even if it shows this dear head to be as—what shall I say?—as feminine as her heart itself."

Henry must have been fairly intoxicated

with successful despotism, or even he would not just then have ventured to play the Grand Signior with Anne; there was a brevity, a concentration about her, which was ominous. But this he did. Going up to her, he made a motion to pat condescendingly the dear head, which he had been commending even under guise of blame. Anne sprang back against the wall, her eyes flaming.

"No more of that, if *you* please!" she panted. "I have stood it long enough. What! do you think I have no self-respect? that I am to be your toy, your slave, your very dog, to fawn upon you for the favour of a smile, and kiss the hand that strikes me? That was what you meant, wasn't it? That was the fate reserved for your wife!"

"Indeed, dear Anne, you quite misunderstand me."

"No; in good time, I understand you.

Tyrant! oh, but unutterably petty tyrant. Sacrificing a whole family to your wounded vanity,—and now, to try to give a high moral tone to spite a woman might be ashamed of. Oh! Henry, can't you be ashamed?"

Henry said nothing. He sighed and shook his head, at least as significantly as Lord Burleigh.

"I would have married you, Henry, though the thought choked me like the thought of a prison, because I knew from the first you were a prig, and, so far as that goes, I took you with my eyes open. But I did not know, then, that you were as great a domestic bully as ever broke a wife's spirit,—her heart, instead of her head, —and regretted the painful necessity."

"Dear one," said Henry, smiling, "you are excited. Naturally, most naturally. I can make allowances; we must all make

allowances, mustn't we Mrs. Paton? One day I shall make you smile, when I bring this scene to your remembrance—my poor, broken-hearted wife!"

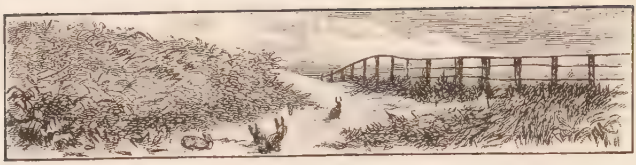
He put his arm round her waist and drew her, this time unresistingly, towards him. Unresisting, for she was stricken powerless. But as his breath grew warm upon her cheek, she turned upon Mrs. Paton eyes of bewildered appeal.

"Mother," she said, "help me."

Henry felt the recoil, and drew back at once.

"Very well, darling, I can wait. Not very long, now."

The girl closed her eyes; a real physical terror came upon her. Before this inexorable calm, she felt herself over-matched.



CHAPTER IX.

"OUR NEXT MERRY MEETING."

In a small close bedroom high up in a poor lodging-house, in a coarsely furnished and not over-clean bed, William Paton lay dying. The grimy maid-of-all-work looked in now and then, opening the door with a rattle and shutting it with a jar; she had promised George, before he started for the theatre, that she would do this much. His unconciliatory manners in private life could not quite dispel the effect of one rapturous evening when, from a corner of the pit, she had beheld him in a cotton velvet doublet, and moustaches, singing to a tinkling guitar.

So she looked in faithfully, to see if the invalid wanted anything. He never did; at any rate he never said so. He lay on his back, propped up high with musty pillows whose leanness was eked out by pieces of apparel; for his breathing was very bad. The flies clustered upon the dirty bed-curtains, buzzed about the spoons and bottles on the dusty mantel-shelf, and he lay and watched them. Now and then, when one had been tormenting him with a constantly renewed dance before his face, like a Red Indian around his victim at the stake, he would make a movement to brush it aside. But when the attack was straightway resumed, he gave in; the exertion was too great.

He knew that he was dying, and on the whole he was not sorry. He looked round on life as it actually was, as it had been of late, as it could not but be in the future,

and he felt that there was little more satisfaction to be got out of it. Beyond life he did not look much, not because he theoretically disbelieved in a beyond, for he did not, but because he had never been in the habit of looking forward at all on any principle but one—that of hoping the best, while not expecting the worst. As this principle cannot always be carried out, even in the affairs of this world, if the future in contemplation be subjected to too rigid a scrutiny, this philosopher had always been careful not so to subject it; till, at last, he found that, to keep prospects pleasant, it was only needful to keep them vague. So, vaguely now, he hoped for the best, but was glad to think of it as seldom as possible; not so much because the prospect was painful, as because it was—necessarily under the circumstances—unsubstantial.

When it became apparent that, from the

day of Mrs. Paton's death, the spring of the widower's own life was broken, his acquaintances were surprised. George was surprised; but perhaps no one was more surprised than Paton himself. The habits of thirty years are not to be broken with impunity, and, with him, his wife had become a habit. She had not been a very good wife *for* him. But *to* him she had been the best of wives, let us say the best of partners, who had the virtue of never looking injured, and who (even in the hot days of youth, before experience had taught her philosophy), though she might storm, was never known to nag or whine. His discharge from the theatre completed the break-down. In the shock of Mrs. Paton's death, the manager, struck with a sort of compunction, had revoked his sentence against George, even promoting him in salary and honour. But

with regard to the old man, he was adamant. William cried a little, moped a great deal, betook himself more and more often to the public-house, evading George's watchfulness with wonderful ingenuity; and between *ennui*, grief, and brandy, began to age and break more, day by day. One morning, he could not get up; after that he never left his bed again. Soon George sent for the doctor. The doctor came daily, but could do nothing for cure, could only alleviate his sufferings which, at times, were very severe; and perhaps it was partly the effect of the opiates that were freely administered, that kept Paton so quiescent.

So he lay there, watching flies, listening to the rattle of the drays over the stones below and the creak of a crane from the docks, till the dusk thickened in the room, and the flies retired for the night, and

the drays and the crane were heard no more. No one brought him a light, nor did he attempt to ring for one, though George had contrived an arrangement of string which connected him, more or less uncertainly, with the bell-rope. He lay and watched the darkness, as he had watched the flies; and his breathing came harshly and heavily upon the silence. Presently his eyes closed; when he opened them again it was in a paroxysm of pain; he tugged convulsively at the string, but the thing would not work; he tried to cry out, but the cry was a hoarse gasp. And then the door was jerked open, and the light of a lamp was dashed upon him. It was a poor lamp, really; but in the sudden change from the darkness, it seemed to pierce and burn into his brain. He put up his hands to his eyes, and cried out once more. Someone said snappishly: "There!

now, perhaps, you can see for yourself," then: "Well! you needn't cry out before you're hurt. I ain't going to throw away the lamp on you—make yourself easy. Here, 'Tilda, bring along the dip. Going to stay here, are you? Oh! very well; please yourself."

The light disappeared, the night closed round upon him again with a sense of coolness; his hands fell down by his side, and he sighed as if in relief, but the sigh ended in a groan. Out of the darkness, the groan seemed to be answered by a little frightened sob. Both sounds went up solitary; the sufferers stood mutually unconsoled.

'Tilda started, when she came in and the feeble light of the dip showed her a girl, in travelling dress, standing helpless and forlorn near the door.

"Lor! miss," she said; "you didn't

ought to be here." But the only answer was addressed to the figure on the bed: "Oh! Uncle Will; whatever shall I do?"

William Paton's eyes, dim with pain, rested on her unmeaningly; with another groan, he pointed towards the bottles on the chimney-piece.

"It's the soothing-syrup he wants," explained 'Tilda; "the pain do be bad at times;" and putting down the candle, she took a little bottle and a dusty glass from the shelf. But before she could do more, Anne had taken it from her.

"It is my place to do for him now," she said. And with a hasty glance at the directions, she proceeded, with easy liberality, to pour out such a dose as would assuredly have delivered the patient for ever, from all earthly ills, within a few minutes.

"Lor' Miss!" said 'Tilda again, this time

with a giggle—it was not often she got a chance of feeling superior to anybody; "were you wanting to finish the old gentleman off at once? It's pison, miss, that stuff is. Here!"

She took the glass from Anne's unresisting hand, and righted the dose, roughly enough to be sure, but still keeping fairly on the safe side. As for Anne, this last blow seemed to have dispirited her altogether. She made no attempt to take the medicine to the sufferer, but stood where she was, looking, with scared eyes, at the agonized face on the pillows; at the features to which the shadows, which the dip seemed to produce more freely than light, gave a still more appalling semblance of distortion. And great tears of weariness, and fright, and desolation, rolled down her cheeks, one by one.

Just then the landlady's voice was heard

calling sharply, and 'Tilda fled. Anne was left alone with the sick man. After the draught, he had lain back with closed eyes, his forehead still contracted with pain, and every breath a groan. But by degrees the medicine seemed to take effect; the tension of his frame relaxed, he ceased to moan, and presently he opened his eyes, with a long sigh. Their faded gaze turned upon Anne; it rested there, long and contemplatively, till into his face came, at last, a dim light of recognition. He feebly moved one hand—a sort of mockery of welcome.

"Our next merry meeting, Nancy," he said faintly, and laughed with a weak, far-off sound.

"Do you know me, then?" said Anne. "And you remember?"

Then she came and flung herself on her knees by the bedside, and uttering again her first unanswered wail: "Oh! Uncle

Will, what shall I do?" began to cry as though her heart would break.

"There doesn't seem to be much luck about our meetings, does there?" said her uncle, reflectively. "As to what you are to do, it really is a puzzler. I can't well offer to take you with me, under the circumstances; in fact, the best advice I can give you, is to get back where you came from, as quickly as possible."

Anne's sobs ceased. She raised her head, and looked him solemnly in the face.

"That I can never do," she said, impressively. "Never."

She paused. Perhaps, after all, she hoped for a contradiction, at any rate for a chance of unburdening her soul, this girl who, as the rebellious despair which had started her on her wild journey began to lose its first stimulating power, had been sustained by visions of soft massive arms,

which would soon fold her, like a baby, to an ample bosom; of a vast and easy motherliness, by which all her wrongs and woes would be hushed and comforted. Those visions were shattered; still it may be that she hoped for the sympathy of interest, even if she had missed the sympathy of love. If so she was disappointed. In William Paton the natural egotism of death was reinforced, a hundredfold, by the selfishness of a lifetime. He was weak, too, in body and mind; argument, even on matters that concerned himself, was a weariness to the flesh, and this was really no business of his. So when, after that tentative pause, Anne repeated—

"Do you understand, Uncle Will? I can never go back," he merely murmured—

"Then I suppose you must stay."

After that he took no further notice of her; he sank, by degrees, into what might

have been either sleep or stupor, Anne could not tell which. If it was sleep, she did not like to disturb him; the alternative supposition frightened her so horribly that she would undoubtedly have fled, but for the fact that there was literally no spot on earth that she could fly to. In sheer despair, she sat where she was, on the floor, by the bedside; from time to time she darted a reproachful glance, at the far-withdrawn man in the bed.

"He never even asked me why I came," she murmured indignantly; and then she would burst out again into tired crying, sobbing under her breath, "Oh, Aunt Theresa, why did you die and leave me like this!"

At last she dropped off into an uneasy doze, her head on an old portmanteau. She woke up bewildered, with a start, out of dreams that seemed to have lasted for hours; someone was coming up the stairs.

George was not accustomed to be on ordinarily sociable, much less on confidential, terms with his neighbours. Consequently, when 'Tilda let him in, he failed to notice the excitement which was struggling with her sleepiness; and she stood far too much in awe of him to volunteer information without encouragement. He came in, shading the candle he carried with his hand; he set it down and stood a moment fairly transfixed. Travel and tear-stained, sleepy and dishevelled, her beauty dimmed, her golden tresses rough and tumbled, it was still Anne who crouched, gazing bewildered at him, on the floor. The first thing she said as she struggled to her feet was—

"Oh, George! what o'clock is it?"

And he was still so confused that he answered mechanically, with no sense of inadequateness—

"It struck eleven just as I turned into this street." Then the whole preposterousness of the situation leaped upon him at once. "What, in heaven's name, Anne, brings you here?"

"Get me something to eat first; I am so hungry."

"Answer me, if you please."

"I ran away, because I wouldn't marry Henry Stephens."

George threw up his arm, with a gesture of despair. "You must be mad! Nay, don't destroy your best excuse. For if you came here, knowing what you were about—— It is not possible for me to finish."

"I came to Aunt Theresa, and she is dead, and I wish I was dead too!"

"Ah!" he said, and no more for a moment. Then it was abruptly; "Did you say you were hungry?"

"I have not tasted food since midday, and been travelling all the time."

"Come with me, then. Gently; we must not disturb the house."

The meal, to which he set her down in the other room, was not very inspiriting, either in quality or arrangement. A few hunches of cold mutton, supplemented with dry bread, and washed down with water which still remembered the heat of the day; this set out on the bare table, and illuminated by one bedroom candle. It was George's own supper, but Anne did not guess this; and as annoyance and perplexity had quite taken away any wish for it, he merely signed to her to sit down, and stood, leaning against the mantelpiece, watching her.

Anne was far too healthily hungry to be dainty, and it was wonderful to see how she revived. He could almost measure

the rising of her spirits with every mouthful; could see how the delicate colour came back to her white cheek, and the light to her eye. At first, she scarcely looked up from her plate; but, by-and-by, her eyes began to wander about the room, taking in her surroundings with an interest in which a strange attraction mingled with depression and even disgust. At last, she folded her arms upon the table; and turning, with her head only, towards George, she said—

"We are very unlucky, you and I."

It came upon him, for a moment, that they were. As she sat there, looking up at him from between dishevelled tresses of golden hair,—beautiful exceedingly and hopelessly adrift,—she seemed a vagrant, impenitent Eve, rueful rather than regretful, more ready to condole with a fellow exile than to condemn him. With the

next thought, he rebelled against her summary bracketing of their cases; he failed to see the likeness between them.

"Luck has a good deal to answer for," he said drily.

"Hasn't it?" said Anne, cordially. "I have never had any, up till now; perhaps this new life may be better. I'm beginning to think it may not be half bad, after all."

She paused, apparently for congratulation; but George was, for the moment, beyond the power of speech.

"You know, I did feel very much out of heart when I first got here. I was so tired; I did not know it was possible to be so tired. And when they told me about Aunt Theresa—George, I can't tell you how I felt! It was as if I had got to the very edge of the world, after walking all the way, and there was nothing to be

done but just to drop over at once, and finish. Did you ever feel like that?"

"Perhaps never with such reason."

"Oh, you know, I think the chief reason was being so hungry," said Anne, modestly unwilling to own to a superiority of emotional experience. "I don't feel like that, now."

"You don't?"

"No. I feel—a little—lonely." She tried to make an ominous faltering sound like the slowness of deliberation. "I should like to have—say, our Eliza—here. Poor Eliza!" she went on, with a laugh most like a sob, "she will miss me. I was the only person in the house, that ever dared to make a joke. Yes, I should like to have her here; or—or—Hester. You needn't look at me so, George; I'm not going to cry again. I didn't come without counting the cost. Of course I knew I

must give up something; take the rough with the smooth. If the rough has been rather worse than I expected, the smooth may be better too. I tell you that, before long, I shall probably really like it."

"*What* do you expect to like? I cannot follow you. It is impossible that you should realize what you are saying."

"Not altogether, of course," she conceded. "One never can quite tell what anything will be like, till one has tried. But about the kind of life you lead—— Well! I know you never cared about it, but I'm not like you. You don't know, perhaps, what it is to be in prison. Not to be able to get out, that is the dreadful part; to know there is a whole free world, miles and miles of it, outside, and yet to be kept in. In your words and your looks; in every possible way. You must never go the whole way anywhere, when

you are in prison. You understand? You must not laugh nor cry, only sigh and simper; and you must never, never speak your mind. If you want to sing, you must sit down to the piano and do it properly; and you must never even *wish* to whistle. But here,—here I can sit on the table, and whistle all day long, if I choose. See! I choose now."

She suited the action to the word; her bird-like whistle, silvery clear, trilled sweetly through the silent room. George did not expostulate by word or look; he stood motionless and expressionless, with folded arms, and eyes fixed on vacancy. To say he was disgusted would be but feebly to express his feelings; he could not perceive that there was more of hysterical bravado, than of enjoyment, in the proceeding. The hurry and gathering shrillness of the tones, which would have

spoken clearly enough to a woman, meant nothing to him. Anne broke off short.

"There! Oh, George, it is good to be free; to have all the world before you for your possession. Isn't it strange that I could look out of the window at Ridgelands, over woods, and hills, and fields, which were all but mine, and only feel I was poor as a slave is poor, for want of the one thing worth having—liberty. While here, in this shabby dirty room (I beg your pardon, George, but it *is*, you know); with not a thing to call my own but the clothes I stand up in, and not five pounds in my purse, I feel mistress of every possibility." She stretched out her arms, with a long breath. Then as he still stood silent, her tone changed. "You see," she said sharply, "it has all been of no use. I was not made to be respectable."

George made a movement of irrepressible aversion.

"For the sake of all womanhood, Anne, try not to subject my respect for your sex to such a strain. You can't want to drive me to agree with you."

"I don't care whether you agree with me or not."

He strode towards the door.

"It is only common kindness to leave you to recover yourself," he said, turning on the threshold. "You have probably found out, from the landlady, that the house is full; but this room, of course, is at your disposal for the night. And by this time to-morrow, safe in the home you never should have left, you will be glad to remember that I refused to think as badly of you, as you would have wished. Good-night."

"Stop!" cried Anne, leaping down.

"You think then," she panted, "I am going back?"

"What else?"

"Go back, to have the door shut by a servant in my face? to be driven away from my father's house, in the sight of all Clapham? Oh, don't talk to me! I tell you, if I was to crawl home dying,—dragging myself back on my hands and knees to die,—they might hear me crying in the night outside, beating at the doors with the last of my strength, and they would not take more notice than they would of a stray cat, mewing and scratching in the dark. Not so much; Hester would let that in, and give it some milk, poor thing! It's proper to be kind to dumb animals."

"This is ridiculous exaggeration."

"It is truth, and you know it—or you should. Surely you have some reason to do so."

His face paled and darkened; he did not speak. She saw her advantage.

"Once for all, I will not, because I cannot, go back. You don't believe in the impossibility; will you be satisfied if I write, tell them the whole truth,—where I am, what I found there,—and put myself at their disposal? I have money enough to keep me till I get their answer; or till you are as certain as I am now, that never, through all the years, will there be any answer to come. Will that satisfy you? Will it?"

"Oh!" he cried, "this is intolerable. What is the use of asking me? You know what I think. Take your own course, then! I shall neither make, nor mar. One thing only (that I should have to say it!)—here, in this house, you cannot stay. Do you wish me, perhaps, to furnish you with the reasons against it, in detail?"

Anne looked at him, not down; and reproachful, not perplexed. The colour of a late awakened consciousness rose to her face, and its dew to her eyes.

"You hit hard, George," she said; "you might be a little more merciful. I am not so strong as you think."

CHAPTER X.

FREE AND INDEPENDENT.

GEORGE composed himself to his night-watch, scarcely knowing how he felt. Now that he was away from Anne, she disturbed him as much, and more strangely, than she had done when he was in her presence. Her beauty, which, when it had been before his eyes, had left him cold, so cold that he had not even been conscious of observing it,—revenged itself by haunting his mind, now that it was withdrawn from his sight. He did not dwell on it with delight, or with desire; the thought of it ran, as an unacknowledged

undercurrent, through the troubled stream of his meditations.

How beautiful she was, and how desolate! Beautiful and desolate, and George was chivalrous by nature; yet not one spark of a champion's fire could Anne kindle in his breast. Oh! she was impossible! a champion, indeed—she had no need of one. Here was no damsel of romance, appealing by her very helplessness. Lovely enough for any heroine, she was; but that manner—in the most literal meaning fraternal! Oh! she was impossible. She had absolutely come to him, spoken to him, not even as a sister; exactly as a young brother might come to an elder one, for help in some only half-repented scrape.

And yet, and yet, she was woman after all! How beautifully she had blushed, as she turned away from him, but now! no

sudden, painful flame, but a slow suffusion of rose, gradual and delicate as the dawn. And her eyes, softened, and for a moment informed with that distinctive femininity the lack of which was their sole defect—how beautiful they were! Still—

> "If she be not fair for me,
> What care I how fair she be?"

In a slightly different sense from that of the original, this was true of George. All these unwonted pictures came before him as mere impertinences. He turned impatiently to the consideration of practical subjects; as these offered little but a maze of difficulties, they served to keep his anger and disapproval warm.

At last he decided on the lodgings at which he should place her next day; after all, this was the only thing on which he could decide. Then he rose from his place, and went across to his father. Paton

lay in the torpor, in which he spent the greater part of his time. George returned to the easy-chair he had bought for his mother, and composed himself to sleep. He could not help thinking what a fallen idol Anne had come back to, remembering her childish devotion. And he slept; and in dreamland he stood, with Anne, upon a barren shore; and their eyes, burning with tears, were bent on something that lay dead between them, by the sea,—and he knew it was a dead illusion.

But Anne herself slept far too soundly to dream at all. Such trifles as the hardness, and general fustiness, of the bed on which she, perforce, lay down in her clothes, did not disturb her sleep, or shorten it by a minute. When, at last, she did wake, it was with a sense of unlimited expectation, in which hope quite predominated over fear. The light of last

night's dim candle was not more different from the glory of this morning's sunshine, than were the feelings with which she fell asleep, from those with which she woke. The period on which she was entering was not destined to be the most agreeable of her existence; but now, for a brief hour or so, she did enjoy life as, perhaps, she had never enjoyed it before. Regrets, scruples, had flown with all other darkness on the wings of the night. It was a complete moral holiday; a hen-bred duckling on his first swim may feel as glorious. She enjoyed everything. It was delicious to breakfast picnic fashion, exploring George's cupboard for knives and spoons and possible jam; to drink unstintedly of chilly tea, sweetened with unlimited brown sugar; to jump up in the middle of the meal, without reproof, to find out the meaning of a bugle-call in a neighbouring street.

She did not discover this; but she still leaned out of the window, looking into the busy street. The rattle of trollies, the whistling of street-boys, the chaff, the shouting, the continuous purposeful tramp of hoofs and feet, filled her with a strange delight.

Presently she saw George coming out of a side street. His day had begun long since—indeed it was now past eleven o'clock—and he was coming back from securing Anne's lodgings. The girl bore no malice for last night's skirmish; anxious to prove this, she whistled softly to attract his attention. She failed to do that; but the signal took effect on a party of sailors, who showed their appreciation of the compliment by kissing their hands vigorously, with free and clear expressions of admiration. Anne drew back, but not before George had seen. She was a little

disconcerted, sorry to have annoyed him the first thing. It was with a real desire to conciliate that she turned to him on his entrance.

On his part, George, who had secretly hoped that night would bring wisdom, and that the morning might find her anxious to go home, was taken aback. Far from a penitent, he found a creature in the best of spirits, radiant with health and satisfaction, a very spirit of the morning. For one weak moment, he caught himself wondering what could make the room so bright; the next, he hoped, stiffly, that they had made her comfortable.

"Oh! it is all delightful," said Anne. "'Tilda brought in the tea while I was asleep, I suppose, for I found it on the table; and, for the rest, I foraged. You see I have made myself at home."

"Yes," he said dryly, "I see."

"Oh! George, what a nice place this is. It seems ever so much more like home than Clapham, already. Do you know there are times when I think I must be a changeling; or why am I so different from all the others? It would be odd if I should find the life I was made for, out here, after all. Because when I look and listen,—yes, even when I smell,—there comes a feeling over me, just as if I had *found* myself somehow. Do you understand?"

"Not in the least. Perhaps we had better keep strictly to business. Have you any luggage?"

"Not an ounce. I could not have managed to bring any, even if I had thought of it; but indeed I forgot all about it."

"You will find some things of my mother's in the next room; you need not be afraid of disturbing your uncle, he will not wake for some time now. I give you

ten minutes to make up a parcel, and then you must be ready to come with me to your lodgings. I have a rehearsal at twelve, so I must beg you not to waste time."

"I *should* like to go to a rehearsal," Anne confided to a spider's web, in a distant corner. But as the spider itself could not take less notice of this aspiration than George did, she went to make her preparations.

"I have found you nice, quiet lodgings, with respectable people," George began, as they went down the street. "Have the goodness, Anne, to attend to me, for a few moments. I may not see you again for some time, and there are arrangements that must be made. And if you could contrive to look quietly before you, and not keep smiling as if Bristol had been got up expressly for your amusement, perhaps we should attract less attention."

They were not by any means in a fashionable quarter; but to walk even through commercial Bristol, carrying a large and ill-made paper parcel, and in company with a startlingly beautiful girl, whose luminous eyes kept beaming at everything, from the shipping to the smallest street-boy, with the frankest interest, was not unmixed delight.

But remonstrance was useless. It was with difficulty he got her across Bristol Bridge at all, while not an incident in the crowded streets beyond escaped her notice. But at last, turning down a narrow lane to the left, the roar and the bustle gradually died away behind them. George stopped at an old house, in a kind of court, close to the Temple Church. The bell clanged somewhere far away, and nobody hurried to answer it. As they stood waiting, a cat's meat man turned into the court; one

or two half-starved curs whined imploringly at his heels; when he lifted up his voice in the cry of his trade, they howled louder, and a few lean cats, shrill with hunger, mewed responsive. There was not another living creature to be seen; and it was hard to say what kind of creature would have been in keeping with the place.

A faded, melancholy-looking woman, aggressively tidy, and all over the colour of whitey-brown paper, opened the door at last. She did not ask their business; she stood looking before her, with pale eyes in which every spark of interest seemed to have died out long ago. Behind her, a dark narrow passage deepened, as it receded, from twilight into night.

"This is the young lady that has taken the room, Mrs. Parsons," said George; "I'm sure you will make her comfortable.

And you quite understand that she wishes to be very quiet."

Mrs. Parsons nodded. She did not look at Anne, nor indeed at George; merely into space. She moved a little aside to let the new lodger pass, and Anne moved on, as if stunned. But when she somehow found herself, with George, in a room furnished in horse-hair—a dressmaker's work-room evidently, and one at present occupied with a mourning order—she recovered her speech.

"I can't live here, George!" she exclaimed desperately. "What were you thinking of to bring me to such a place? It would kill me!"

"I hope not, since there is no help for it," he said quietly; "and a stay of a few days can scarcely be called living in a place. For you must promise me that you will write your letter at once."

"I don't know that I shall write it at all," said Anne, rather inconsistently.

"Then I shall; but it would come better from you than from me, and I should have thought you would have preferred it."

Anne gave him a look in which amazement was mingled with a kind of awful admiration. But she only said sulkily—

"You needn't trouble yourself. I shall write; though I know how much use it will be."

"Till the answer comes, you will stay quietly here. If you want me, you must send. Mrs. Parsons will find a messenger; but—excuse plain speaking—you must not be running over to our place, every day and all day long. I will let you know how your uncle goes on. Now, I must say good-bye."

He hurried away. Anne stood alone, in the middle of the scraps of crape and bom-

bazine. She felt angry, rebellious; then, in a moment, every other feeling was swallowed up by an awful wave of depression, surging up to tears. The entrance of Mrs. Parsons prevented an actual break down. In a voice as melancholy as her face, she proposed to show Anne her room.

A room at the back of the house, it proved to be. It was clean and bare, and very chilly; and stuffy, with the peculiar cold stuffiness of lodging-house bedrooms. A white calico blind, before the window, was drawn down; the north light diffused itself through the room, in a kind of dim white glare. As soon as Mrs. Parsons was gone, Anne, whose first instinct was always to the window, went to draw this blind up; the view was straight down into the churchyard! She did not linger over it; the parcel she had brought

with her caught her eye, and suggested some employment. For a little while she made herself fairly happy with hanging things up, and putting them away in the little sticking fusty drawers. It was something like playing at Desert Island, a dear game of her childhood; some touch of its delightful excitement came back to her, as she moved about inspecting and arranging her stores. But when the last article was put away, her spirits began to sink again. To sit in a retired bedroom looking on to a churchyard (of which, in her secret soul, she was horribly afraid), with nothing to do and no one to speak to, did not fulfil her ideal of the joys of emancipation. It was independent, no doubt, but it was dull; and dullness—that is to say, time for thought—did not suit Anne, particularly just now. Her conscience was a rather rudimentary and uncertain possession, but it did exist;

and it was active enough, now, to make reflection uncomfortable. Perhaps it was really as much to pacify it, as to get something to do, that she resolved to set about fulfilling George's behest and write home.

After some experimental wandering she found Mrs. Parsons in the kitchen, giving directions to a red-armed servant girl, whose plain but wholesome personality was the most cheerful thing Anne had yet found in the house. From Mrs. Parsons she obtained pen, ink, and paper, of third-rate quality. Then she returned to her solitude, turned her back on the churchyard, and entered on the agonies of composition. Now it may be admitted that she had not a very easy or pleasant task before her; and, above all human inventions, Anne hated that of letter-writing, at the best of times. She did it so ex-

ceedingly badly that she had some reason to hate it. It was really not heartlessness, nor any wish to aggravate (though it read like both), but sheer incapacity for expressing herself on paper, which resulted at last in the following letter:

"My Dear Father and Mother,

"I hope you are quite well, and have not been frightened about me. I arrived in Bristol quite safely, yesterday evening. I am sorry to say I found Aunt Theresa dead, and Uncle Will is very ill; the girl at their lodgings said he was dying, but I did not think he looked so bad as all that. I do not know exactly when Aunt Theresa died, or how; I must ask. George was very kind; he gave me some supper and let me have his room, and now he has taken this lodging for me, but I do not like it much. I thought I

had better stay here till I heard from you, because I did not know whether you would care for me to come back or not, because it has been rather uncomfortable lately for all of us, and, please, I can *never* marry Henry. I would rather starve—at least, I think so. But I suppose I need never quite come to that; I am sure George could always find me something to do at the theatre, so, if you do not care to have me back, you need not worry about thinking I shall starve. I am very sorry I had to run away, because I am afraid it may have worried mother; but it was the only way out of the mess that I could think of, and I suspect it was the best for all of us, really. Please try to make Henry understand. I always told him it was a mistake; he will remember I said so the day he asked me. I hope he bears no malice, and I hope he will be very

happy, with someone that likes being managed.

"Please give Hester my love, and tell her not to cry; there is nothing to cry for.

"If you do not want me to come back, please would you be so kind as to send me my things. I have only got some old clothes of Aunt Theresa's here. Hester may keep my old grey frock for her district, and my garden hat, and if she very much wants the spotty gingham gown she may have that too; but it is not really worn out.

"Good-bye, dear father and mother. I do not at all expect you to forgive me; at least, I think, perhaps, mother may, but if father will not, you must not mind. I shall think of you often; and you can talk about me to Hester, if he does not allow you to speak of me to anyone else, and I shall

seem much nicer, and make you much happier, that way, than if I was at home; because, you know, I never did get on, not even when I really tried. Now I must stop.

"With love and respect,

"Your dutiful and affectionate daughter,

"ANNE PATON."

Anne read this wonderful performance through, when she had finished it. She was not altogether satisfied with it, but she was so certain that she could not do it any better, that she only thought of getting it out of her sight, and off her mind, as quickly as possible. She put on her hat, and set out to find a post-office.

But, once across the bridge, she lost her way completely. At last, she found herself in a large square of sombre and rather handsome houses. In the centre were

trees, and grass, and an equestrian statue; a few stone benches had been placed here, and Anne sat down on one of these.

It was a quiet spot, though the roar of traffic went by it within ear-shot, and though the street leading out of it, on the far side, ended in a view of a crowd of masts. The square itself seemed not to be a thoroughfare to anywhere in particular, so that, beyond an occasional errand boy, there were few people to be seen. Anne sat, and looked, and listened, and wondered vaguely how she should find her way back; not that she was in any immediate hurry to return, the solitude out of doors was preferable to that of her little back room in the mournful house.

"And if George supposes that I am going to sit up there, or, worse still, in that family vault downstairs, till I get their answer, he will find himself mistaken,

that's all," she said to herself with decision. "I'm not his prisoner, though he seems to think so. Who told him I wanted to be so very quiet, I should like to know? He is as bad as Henry—well, no; he is rather quicker, and certainly shorter. But I am half afraid that he is really strong, where Henry is only stiff with starch. How odd it is," she reflected plaintively, "that men get so disagreeable as soon as you belong to them in any way; when they may be as jolly as possible, so long as you are independent of them. For instance, I don't think even Hester can really think father an agreeable man, at home. And yet, he can be as polite and pleasant as possible to outsiders, like the Stephenses; although it couldn't matter a bit, to them, what sort of a temper he was in, because, if he made himself unpleasant, *they* could get rid of him. And it seems to be the way with all

of them. There *was* a day, when I could turn Henry round my little finger; that was before he felt sure of me. Now I might tear my hair out before his very eyes, and cry for an hour on end, and I could not move him. He would just stand, and smile, and call me baby names. Ah! if I do come to a bad end, as they always said I should, I shall still go to it thankful, thankful with all my heart, to think that I am quit of *him*, at any rate."

In her sudden passion she uttered the last sentence quite out loud. She sprang to her feet as she spoke; her pretty hands made a gesture of utter rejection; she began to walk rapidly, as if to defy the very memory of those intolerable chains; her head was up, her eyes shone. In her excitement she had almost forgotten where she was, till she nearly ran into a girl who was, standing across her path.

Anne coloured, but before she could speak the girl said—

"Oh, don't mind me! I'm not hurt. Don't let me disturb you. Go on with your rehearsing; my! but you do it fine; a precious deal better than the old cat in there," with a sweep of her arm to the right.

"I don't understand you," said Anne, hastily, with more shame than might have been expected. "I wasn't rehearsing; nothing of the kind. I—I was looking for the post-office."

"Well," said the girl, "if that's the way you look for a post-office, I should like to hear you say, 'Unhand me, sir!' and all the rest of it. But that's not my concern, of course. Are you good at finding your way?"

"Not very."

"Then you had better give a penny to

a boy to post your letter for you; because it is a roundabout way from here, anyhow, and by the time I had finished telling you, it would be a worse puzzle still. It is a way things have, when I try to explain them. I can't offer to go with you, because my dinner's in the opposite direction; and I want it, I can tell you, after a couple of hours of old Wellings' temper, and *hers*, and on my legs all the time. Here, give me the letter; I'll find a boy that can be trusted."

Anne held out the letter, feeling less mistress of the situation than she could have desired—in fact, positively humble. She understood that her new acquaintance was at home in a world of which, despite her boasts and her fine natural dispositions, she was herself, as yet, but an outsider and no citizen.

"Perhaps you can tell me where I am,"

she suggested. "I seem to have quite lost my way. What is this square?"

"Queen's Square. Where do you live?"

Anne looked blank, then she began, "It is somewhere near a church with a tower on the slant, and a churchyard; a house kept by an old woman who looks as if she had been dead once, and never talks, and makes mourning. I don't know——" then with sudden vehemence, "Give me back that letter; oh, great stupid that I am! I never gave them the address to write to. I couldn't, because I don't know it myself."

"You're bright, aren't you?" said the other sarcastically, as she prepared to hand back the letter; but before surrendering it, she coolly examined the address. Then she said, "Hulloa!" and proceeded to examine Anne's appearance with more attention. "Paton!" she said; "then you

must be Mother Parsons' new lodger. I know all about you; I was with the old lady this morning, when George Paton came about the lodgings. I know who you are, because he told her. I daresay he wouldn't have, if he had known I was just inside the parlour with the door open, but he did. Oh, yes, I know! And—you have run away from the old folks at home."

"Did George tell that?" cried Anne, stopping short and facing round furiously.

The girl laughed provokingly.

"I like to see you in a rage," she said; "you aren't afraid of letting yourself go. But as it happens, he didn't; I guessed it. And how do you like Mother Parsons' place? Cheerful, isn't it? I suppose you have the room looking over the churchyard; a nice place that. Many's the time I've stood at that window, and watched the corpse-lights dancing on the graves."

"Nonsense!" said Anne, rather shakily.

"Ah, you wait and see! But that's nothing; what do you think of this? One evening we were standing by that very window—I, and poor Bessie, and Nellie Williams, that used to do the first fairy that year in the pantomime; she's married now, and minds the shop. And it was as you might say dusk, not really dark. And all of a sudden— Do you know that very old brick tomb, with a great crack across the side, and white grasses draggling out of it like dead folks' hair?"

Anne had not particularly noticed this cheerful object, and said so.

"Well, you look out for it, when you get back. Where was I? Oh! all of a sudden, from right out of *that*, there came the most awfullest screech, ever you heard in your life. Once, not any more; a screech to make your blood run cold; as it might

have been some one buried alive. But you needn't mind that. I never heard tell of anyone that heard it, before or since. But we did, then."

"Do you live in the house?" asked Anne, with studied indifference.

"No; I live over the way. But I used often to be there, in poor Bessie's time. We were good friends, and Mother Parsons wasn't so serious then as she has turned since. I look in still, now and then, for the sake of old times; but I can't stand much of it. No; it isn't exactly a jolly establishment now-a-days. You haven't found it so, have you?"

"No," sighed Anne. "Who was Bessie?" she asked, after a pause.

"Bessie Parsons, her daughter. She was burnt to death at the theatre; fairy's parts she used to do. When they brought her home, she was that scorched and

blackened you'd have said her own mother wouldn't know her; I suppose she did though. All that night she sat up alone with the body; fancy that! And a person, that was in the house, told me she heard her keep talking, on and off, on and off, all the night through. And next morning when she came out she was just what she is now—as you say, as if she had been buried and dug up."

The end of this inspiriting anecdote brought them to the court.

"Here's my place," said the girl. "If you want me, ask for Emma Barratt. Good-bye for the present; keep your spirits up, and I'll run over to see you when I can. I shall bring some of the old play-books along with me, for you to try some parts over; that will amuse us both."

Anne went on listlessly. She had not been greatly fascinated by her new ac-

quaintance; but the world seemed a rather duller and emptier place, now that she was left alone again. Having breakfasted so late, she was not hungry, so that the discovery that dinner was ready did not raise her spirits as it might otherwise have done. Indeed, the smell of cabbage, which in consequence pervaded the house, tended distinctly to melancholy. The meal was laid in a dark little nondescript back room, and she was waited on by Mrs. Parsons; it might have been the funeral feast spread by the spectre bride for her perjured lover, in the legend.

After dinner she sat down to adapt her wardrobe. She was a very fair needlewoman, though she was not fond of sewing. This afternoon, however, she welcomed it as a possible refuge from thought; but it failed of its effect. It was the first quiet time she had had since her flight, and

reflection, which would have done better to come before, would not be denied now. She tried to sing over her work, but her voice, always sensitive to her spirits, failed her; the dead stillness of the quiet house seemed to choke her breath. Think she must, little pleasant as thought was.

She thought of how she would have been spending the afternoon at home, and her heart beat quickly, and then sank with a sort of fear, feeling that,—whether for good or ill,—so she would never, never spend it again. It did not seem very good, just then. Anne's courage, like her voice, was very dependent on her spirits, and those were dependent on externals to an absurd extent; at present, they were low indeed. A real terror seized her; not so much of the future, though that was none too bright, but of the irretrievableness of the past. One hasty hour of passion

and despair; three short lines, rather of defiance than farewell, scribbled through blinding tears of helpless wrath; some few score miles put behind her, and she was cut off from all her past for ever. Upon this point she felt no doubt at all. Parents, sister, lover, friends, all gone in a moment, as it were; and gone for ever. Never any more the protecting sanctities of home; the sheltered, ordered, provided for existence. Never any more the life as free from all need for thought, on her part, as that of the birds and flowers. Anne certainly did not put her thoughts into these words; but the sentiments were the same, and they did not cheer her.

She pictured to herself the altered household now; the household into whose quiet midst she herself had flung the thunderbolt. She could imagine it all; her father's angry shame, her mother's and

Hester's tears, Mrs. Stephens' smothered satisfaction, Henry's discomfiture. At this safe and impassable distance, even the writhings of his wounded vanity touched her with a half contemptuous remorse.

As the afternoon wore on, depression settled down upon her like a cloud. If her thoughts had been gloomy, they were cheerful compared to the horror of the fancies which began to afflict her when, at last, the gathering dark forced her to lay down her work. From where she sat, with her back to the window, the churchyard seemed to draw her with an awful fascination; and if she looked at the bed, it was scarcely better. For had not this, perhaps, been Bessie's room? Then, on that bed, they had laid her down; a dreadful thing, blackened and unrecognizable, the rags of her butterfly splendour hanging about her like flakes of tinder; there, by

her side, had sat that awful woman, with no light but a horrid moon, making the blinded window into one white, dead eye; there she had sat, all through the night that had made her the walking death she was now.

Anne sat staring at the bed, glimmering through the dark, till she worked herself into a perfect ecstacy of fright. All at once, there was a sound from somewhere near the bed's head; the vallance waved without wind. It was only a mouse, but the girl was in no state to reason. With one cry of deadly terror, she turned and fled. Down the stairs she fled, blind with fright, through the vault-like entrance hall, and never paused till, somehow or other, she found herself in the open air.

Emma Barratt, coming out leisurely and whistling on her way to the theatre, saw a golden gleam in the lamp-light, and

going closer, made out Anne, bareheaded, standing forlornly against the lamp-post.

"What's up?" said Emma.

"It's haunted," sobbed Anne, indignantly; "there was something moving by the bed. And I'll sleep in the streets sooner than go back to it; I will. I'll go and spend the night on Uncle Will's doorstep; and if George finds me lying there to-morrow morning—cold and stiff—with—with a smile on my dead face—it will just serve him right, that's all. I hope he will."

"Nonsense," said Emma, encouragingly; "*that* room's not haunted, you may make yourself easy about that. It wasn't Bessie's room, ever. But I know what it is. You've got the blues, sitting up there by yourself; you're not used to it, I'll be bound, and that *is* a dismal old undertaker's shop. Why don't you come along

with me to the theatre? I'll see you get a good place."

"To the theatre?" cried Anne, in a very different voice. "Oh! I should like that; but——"

"I'll put you somewhere that your cousin won't notice you, if that's what you're afraid of."

"I wasn't thinking of such a thing."

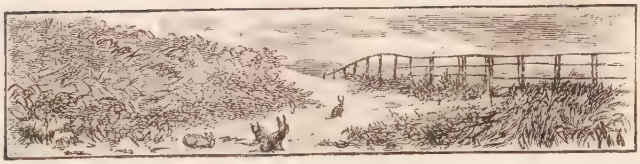
"Oh!" said Emma, but her tone did not express conviction. "Well! just run and get your hat and shawl."

But here there was a difficulty. Anne could not get back into the house without attracting attention, which was undesirable in view of the charge George had given Mrs. Parsons concerning her. Finally, Emma, who for some reason seemed to have set her mind on the expedition, solved the problem heroically.

"You shall have mine; my best go-to-

meeting things," she said generously. "Look sharp, we shall just have time. I must tell Bob to come, too. Bob's my twin, he's a plumber; he doesn't much care for the theatre, but he'll do what I tell him, and of course you must have someone to sit with you, and get you ginger-beer and oranges. What a lark it will be!"

Sir Henry Stephens was not feeling very gay that night; but the bitterness of his reflections might have been proved capable of increase, if he could have pictured his so late betrothed, furnished forth by a bouncing third-class actress, seated in the pit of a provincial theatre, with a young plumber for her cavalier, whose only merit was his exceeding disgust at the position, on his own account.



CHAPTER XI.

IN BOHEMIA.

It would have been quite unfair to accuse Anne Paton of any wish to attract attention that night. On the contrary, she was really anxious to avoid notice; even more anxious than she would quite admit to herself. She had the best desire to get through a foolish adventure with as little *éclat* as possible. At another time it would have been an escapade after her own heart, but just now that heart was heavy and would not rise to the occasion; she was not so much rushing wildly into dissipation, as flying from unbearable dreariness.

It really was not her fault then, if, after all, she failed of self-effacement; and fail she certainly did. No one could hold her responsible for the effect of her radiant beauty, but she was equally guiltless of Miss Barratt's taste in dress. Emma, who passed her daylight hours on week-days a tolerably dowdy grub, came out on Sundays a very gorgeous butterfly indeed. The shot-silk mantle, green and orange—which, made for her own Juno-like proportions, fitted Anne very indifferently—was very dear to Emma's heart. Dearer still was the Sunday bonnet; she thought it stylish. It was certainly startling; the white plume of Navarre could scarcely have been a more effective rallying point for the gaze of his warriors, than were Emma's blue and magenta ostrich feathers for the eyes of the wide circle of her acquaintance. Anne had not been long

watching the yawning emptiness of the pit begin to fill, before she discovered this property of her attire to her cost. Folks who looked to nod, went on to stare; and they did not soon leave off. If, at least, Bob Barratt would have talked or manifested some sense of ownership in her, Anne thought it would have been better. But Bob simply ignored her; she might as well have been alone. If she ventured to address him, he grunted a reluctant answer; but under the circumstances he would have been indifferent to the advances of Venus herself. His soul was consumed with longing for his pipe; he was desperately sulky, and determined that nothing should induce him to be agreeable. Perhaps, after all, this was more fortunate for Anne than she knew.

She began to fancy herself in a queer dream; not her waking dream of the

situation, by any means. This atmosphere of orange peel and ancient dust; this shabby splendour of moreen and dirty paint and tarnished gilding; this audience whose tramp was heard afar, who came in with a clatter and sat down with a flop, whose laugh was a shout or a giggle, who nudged one another on to stare, and stared frankly and long; above, the scanty sprinkling of gentility, condescending and aloof—this was not her imagination of a seat in the pit. It was a relief to her when a weakly orchestra struck up and the curtain rose.

Anne was a most unspoiled play-goer, which was lucky, as there was little in the play to rivet the attention or distract the thoughts of a *blasé* spectator. It was a melodrama of a conventional type, written for the pit and gallery, and gagged for the same much beyond even what was written.

The plot was complicated and the characters seemed innumerable; the sentiments were admirable and clothed in the finest language; they were also delivered at a rather tedious length, but none of it seemed tedious to Anne.

She had so forgotten herself and her surroundings, that it was a shock to her when the persecuted heroine's faithful foster-sister took advantage of an emotional crisis between the lovers, in whose interests she was on the watch, to give Anne an unmistakable wink, forcing her to recognize Emma Barratt. Emma was looking well; the short woollen skirt and rolled-up dimity sleeves showed off her really fine arms and ankles, and the red neckerchief of the stage peasant gave a dash to her rather coarse good looks, more effective by far, had she only known it, than the stylishness of her unhappy bonnet.

But she never would know it; she was not that kind of girl. Her art, such as it was, was of her life a thing apart. She liked her profession well enough, without enthusiasm; it suited her, for she did not ask much of life beyond "bread and games," and the theatre supplied her with both.

So she stood, entirely unmoved by the harrowing situation on the stage, and winked at Anne. It was an unlucky token of friendliness, for it recalled the girl to reality, and to one reality she had not previously grasped—that at any moment she might expect to see George, and, what was more important, that George might see her. With the thought, her interest in the piece vanished. If only the ungallant Bob had provided her with a play-bill! As it was, she could only wait the development of the plot.

She had not to wait long. The curtain

which fell upon the faithful lovers in Dingle Dell, rose again on the library at Beaumont Castle, and on the meditations therein of that arch-villain, the Honourable Montague Dacres, over his betting-book. The Honourable Montague was a dark and decidedly handsome young man, got up as an aristocratic villain, with an elaborately pale complexion and haggard eyes. He was evidently not in the best of tempers. The author had not meant him to be, but Anne, watching him with an interest peculiarly her own, felt that some of the temper was not simulated. She could see that George was in no mood to be merciful or even just, if he should discover her; and there had been moments, of late, which tended to make her a little afraid of him.

Certainly George was not enjoying himself. He had owed his bad eminence on

this occasion solely to his looks and manner of speech; his acting, never more than respectable, was scarcely equal even to the demands of chief villain in a melodrama. Anne, with her keen dramatic instinct, and her sense of the ridiculous, quickened by the tension of her nerves, was overcome now and then with a horrible longing to laugh aloud. The language, the sentiments, the very stage-directions for the part, pointed to the kind of villain most dear to the heart of the British play-goer—the whole conception, magnificent in its improbability, outstripped George in every line; like panting time, he toiled after it in vain, with a grim unwilling conscientiousness which, to anyone knowing the man, was irresistibly funny. He worked at being fast, truculent, sneering, unscrupulous, as hard as some men labour after virtue; and all the time Anne felt him

execrating the necessity, between the lines. The general audience discerned neither the effort nor the reluctance; with them the Honourable Montague simply fell rather flat, scarcely once earning the compliment of a hearty hiss.

Meanwhile the dreaded moment of recognition delayed. Anne was beginning to hope it might be escaped altogether when, all at once, it came. He was in the middle of a soliloquy, and for an instant he lost the thread of his speech, but only for an instant. And he never once glanced in her direction again while the performance lasted. Now, the girl would have given much to meet the eye which before she had avoided. There was an effect of utter repudiation about that averted look, which made her shiver. Almost unknown to herself, she had thought of George as so naturally and unalterably her supporter

and defender, that to feel him fail her was to feel the earth itself unstable to her feet. It struck her with the wild irresistible panic of an earthquake. Never in her life had she been thrown on her own resources. Consequently, she had always believed those resources to be many and great; now she found that they were next to non-existent. Anne was not a very model woman, but she was a very genuine one; and in her weaknesses, at any rate, she was true to her sex. For one thing, she had a perfectly feminine dislike to logical consequences. She had thought she loved and longed for liberty, and so no doubt she did —after the fashion of women: perfect liberty to amuse herself, and a man in the background to ward off consequences; that is, put plainly, to knock down anyone who should dare to take liberties with her. A liberty which had to be enjoyed at her own

risk, which was as open to everyone as it was to her, a fair field and no favour, this had as little attraction for her as it has for any of her sex.

Whenever George was on the scene her eyes followed him, at first still hopefully, afterwards piteously. At last she left off looking, in despair, and now her gaze wandered over the well-filled pit. She was taking stock of the associates to whom he had abandoned her, and a sort of anger grew in her heart, largely mingled with dismay. The anger was for his unreasonable severity; the dismay was for herself, left to find her level in this too free-and-easy brotherhood of Bohemia, as best she might. Anne was not given to diffidence, but the situation was so unlike all her imaginings of it that its mere strangeness paralyzed her with bewilderment. And she had been so sure she would find her-

self at home in it; so sure that, though all unknown there to fame, she was a born Queen of Bohemia, who had only to appear in her kingdom to ensure immediate recognition. That had been her modest *rôle* in her frequent castle-buildings; the reality found her a stranger in a strange land, thankful for the patronizing protection of a bouncing girl immeasurably her inferior in looks and accomplishments, sulked at by a young lout who disliked and despised her as a lady out of place, and upon whom she did not even dare to try her powers of fascination. Alas! even Bohemianism is not to be acquired in a day. Anne, no doubt, had excellent natural dispositions that way, but the trammels of civilization clung to her as yet, and made her awkward and weak. A more fatal condition for success could not have been; in a struggle for social recognition, of any kind, diffidence is half way to defeat.

Long before the performance was over, Anne would have been almost glad to find herself back even in a really haunted room. The pit had, from the first, been hot, noisy, and a trifle odoriferous; as the evening wore on it became hotter, noisier, and more odoriferous. At every interval between the acts there was a general migration among the gentlemen, and Anne thought that, with each return, the feast of reason became more disproportioned to the flow of soul. She was right in her observations, but, from inexperience, she went too far in her conclusions. Nobody was more than exhilarated, long after she had put them down as much further advanced. As for her own cavalier, who was no exception to the rule, an exchange of places effected behind them seemed to have brought friends into his neighbourhood, and to these he devoted himself

over the back of the bench, without any reference to Anne, who felt indignant, in spite of assuring herself that she would not let herself be spoken to by a man in that state.

At last it was over. The Honourable Montague was glowering, in the background, in charge of a policeman; the persecuted heroine was smiling in the embrace of her lowly lover, the gamekeeper, who had just been discovered to be the only son of an earl and rightful owner of the estates of the Honourable Montague; her once stern, now repentant, father was saying, "Bless ye, my children" in the centre; on the right, the virtuous comic sailor, who had so delighted the jolly tars in the gallery, had got his arm round the waist of the faithful foster-sister, who made no objection. And then, once more, Anne noticed Emma signal Bob. In another

moment the curtain fell, and a general scuffle began.

"Emma says we are to wait for her by the stage door," said Bob.

This seemed quite natural to Anne; it did not occur to her that Miss Barratt would have found little difficulty in procuring an escort, supposing she wanted one. And she was not much disconcerted even when a rather noisy party, girls and men, came out with Emma, who were evidently going her way. She could have dispensed with being introduced to them, after a formula of Emma's own; but in the joy of finding herself on the way home even this was endurable. But it seemed to her that they had scarcely been walking long enough to have got back, when the party stopped before an open door. Surely that blaze of light did not come from one of the vault-like passages of the houses in

the court! And they were not in a court at all, but in a street mostly composed of small shops, more or less lit up. As in a bad dream she heard Emma call out, "Where's Miss Anne? Oh, come along with me; I'll look after you," and the next moment she found herself somehow, with all the rest of the party, inside an unmistakable public-house.

She pulled Emma's sleeve.

"Send me home, oh, do!" she whispered in an agony. "Oh, how could you bring me here!"

"It's all right," said Emma, cheerfully; "don't be frightened. I thought you were the sort of girl that would be up to a lark."

So had Anne thought; but this episode did not tally with any of her definitions of the word.

"You can't go, you know; there's no one to take you. I can make Bob do

most things, but even Bob would strike at that; and I *wouldn't* seem to be so mean as to ask him to give up one of Chubbs' suppers. He doesn't give them for every-one, let me tell you."

"But to go into public-houses, at ten o'clock at night, it isn't respectable!" cried Anne, desperately.

"Oh, come, I say, that's a different sort of tune to what you were singing this morning! And it's lucky my temper's what it is, too; you couldn't speak so free to everybody. Not respectable, indeed!"

Emma's temper seemed to be going the way of the tempers of the common herd; but just then Mr. Chubbs, in all the glory of hostship, made a move. A minute later they were all seated in a room behind the bar, round a table whose promise, as it blossomed more and more, seemed to give every satisfaction. The gentlemen became

more animated and facetious; even Bob began to expand. The young ladies beamed, and then giggled afresh. Emma's irritation passed like a cloud; she emerged positively magnaminous.

"You see?" she whispered. "You heard me say he wouldn't do it for everybody? Well, perhaps you thought that meant me, and if I was some sorts I should let you think so, I suppose. But that's not *my* style. No; it wasn't me he did it for, nor it wasn't Harriett, nor it wasn't Jennie. He's done it—for you!"

George reached his lodgings with a mind sternly set to the blankest indifference. From henceforth Anne was nothing to him. After this she might do as she pleased, consort with whom she would; he washed his hands of her altogether. Lightest of straws, vainest of bubbles, let

the destiny her character prepared for her sweep her away; the sooner, and the more completely out of his sight, the better.

Upstairs he found his father's condition unchanged; there was, in fact, only that slow back-slipping of the tide of life whose finer gradations he had not the knowledge to mark. Before settling down for the night it occurred to him to examine his stores, and then he discovered that the supply of brandy was at an end. He frowned over the mysterious disappearance, with the helplessness of a bachelor in lodgings. But frowning was of no avail; he dared not risk the occurrence of one of the patient's fits of collapse, with no stimulant in the house, so he reluctantly called up 'Tilda from her lair in a sort of little cupboard under the stairs to let him out, promising to be back directly.

As he stood waiting to be served at the counter of the public-house which he generally patronized, as being the most comparatively respectable within easy reach, he was aware that a vigorously merry supper-party was going on, somewhere near at hand. But he did not much notice it till, just as he was turning to go, a slight sound of scuffling was followed by a clear young voice of indignation: "Touch me, if you dare, you horrid, horrid——" there was a half-choked second—"you coward! you great bully! You wouldn't dare do it if George was here!" There was a louder burst of laughter than before; in the midst of it, George strode in unheeded. "You will, will you? There, then, take that for your pains," cried Anne again.

With her golden hair dishevelled under the terrible bonnet, her cheeks flaming, her eyes gleaming like sapphires, in the

lamp-light, she stood twisted as far as possible away from Mr. Chubbs, whose arm was round her waist. One white hand, vigorous with the vigour of perfect health, flashed out as she spoke towards her admirer's countenance—flashed, and then dropped half-way. In another second she had wrenched herself free and stood panting, quivering, at George's side. There was a moment's pause; the situation promised to become dramatic.

Then George said very quietly, without noticing the girl by look or touch: "I must apologize for interrupting a pleasant party, but I have come to see my cousin home. I am sorry to deprive her of more congenial escort; unfortunately, I am responsible for her for the time being, and can only follow my own poor lights as to what is desirable for young ladies. Now, Anne, if you are ready. Good-

night, ladies and gentlemen; a pleasant evening to you."

He left a slightly discomfited party behind him, but their discomfiture was not to be compared to Anne's. To her he did not vouchsafe one word, and, for once, she felt she positively dared not address him first. With a furtive glance of deprecation, she meekly pulled her disordered finery into something like proper shape, and glided on before him into the night outside. He did not offer her his arm, and she really had some difficulty, over-tired and dispirited as she was, in keeping pace with his rapid stride through the badly lighted streets. Presently the sense of injury, which fatigue brought home to her, warmed her chilled spirits up to indignation point which, with her, was always the point of utterance. She contained herself till they

turned into the silent solitude of the court.

"Why didn't you knock that fellow down, George?" she exclaimed then suddenly. He made no answer; she repeated the question, with more irritation of manner.

"It seemed to me unnecessary," he said coldly; "for one thing you seemed quite able to defend yourself, for another I scarcely knew whether I should earn your gratitude by the proceeding. It is not always safe to take a lady's indignation too seriously on such occasions."

"What do you mean?" There was no just room for doubt as to the genuineness of the indignation now. Indeed, it rang out so sharply on the mournful stillness that George winced, not from self-reproach, but from outraged propriety. "Didn't you see me within an

inch of boxing the creature's ears? Can you believe I would *ever* have let him—oh! George—let him *kiss* me?"

"My dear girl," he said, as one weary of an uninteresting subject, "how should I know? I'm not prepared to say it would have made much difference, if you had."

He had the grace to be ashamed of himself and sorry, almost before the words were out of his mouth. But Anne flashed out one, "How dare you!" and then her overwrought mind and body gave way together; she fairly sat down on the nearest doorstep, and burst into a storm of tears. Hurt she was, shamed, indignant, not indeed with the agony of rage with which many women would have writhed under the insult; but she did feel it, and having no spirit left to resent, she gave way under it.

"Forgive me!" exclaimed George; "I

have been half mad this long time past, I scarcely know what I am saying, at times; mad I must have been to have so forgotten my manhood even for a moment." He paused; but as Anne still sobbed on, he added, rather perfunctorily but with great propriety: "Believe, at least, Anne, that it was the interest I feel in you that made me so bitter. If you had been indifferent to me should I, could I, have spoken so?"

The words were the words of sentiment, even of passion; the tone was that of pure metaphysics, and Anne, perversely perhaps, but not unnaturally, replied to the tone.

"No," she retorted, choking down her sobs, "no, it isn't true. You have no interest in, no care for me; so far as you are concerned, I might be alone in the world. If it had been Hester, you would have knocked the man down before she

had even time to cry out. But I—if at the last, the latest moment you interfere, and so interfere as to make your very championship an insult, you think you have done more than your duty. You can believe anything of *me*. *I* am capable of getting up a party to go to supper at a public-house; *I*, no doubt, like to flirt with half tipsy players; and if *I* scream, it is about as sincerely as a servant girl playing kiss-in-the-ring on Whit-Monday. Oh! leave me, don't come near me, go away! I am less alone when you are gone. The great world itself, that I am all alone in, the world they call cold and selfish, has more pity for me in its heart than you."

She turned from him and he did not follow her. She found Mrs. Parsons' house and rang the bell. The door opened; he saw her stand a moment on

the threshold, faintly irradiated by a light from within the passage, then the door closed again behind her, and he, too, entered into solitude which he, too, felt to be a relief.

END OF VOL. II.

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